

Rolling Stone

JUNE/JULY 2023
ISSUE 011

UK

CILLIAN MURPHY

The elusive Irishman on playing Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer* and quietly conquering Hollywood

LOYLE CARNER ON FATHERHOOD

How the hip-hop star brought truth to his music

JESSIE WARE'S AGE OF AQUARIUS

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DEBBIE LOVEJOY
NCT DREAM
LOLA YOUNG
OLIVIA DEAN
MARK RONSON
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“For the first 30 years of your life, before you get beaten down by responsibilities, you’re free to activate”

Loyle Carner

LOYLE WEARS
PUFFER JACKET BY
ALWAYS DO WHAT
YOU SHOULD DO,
T-SHIRT BY PRO CLUB
AT BLACKSMITHS,
TROUSERS BY
CARHARTT AT MR
PORTER, WALLABEE
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Thomas Sabo

REBEL AT HEART

Editor's Letter

How will the music industry hold back the tide of AI?



IN THE SAME WAY that today's streaming services were born out of pirate download sites and the CD followed the cassette – which before it had disrupted the prevalence of vinyl – there's a new bad boy on the block: artificial intelligence, more commonly known as plain ol' AI.

It all kicked off recently when Drake and The Weeknd took offence to their voices being used in a new track created without the involvement of either of them – meaning that neither party could cash in on it. Meanwhile, over in the UK, AI gave Oasis fans their long-awaited 'reunion album', using music and lyrics written in lockdown by real-life band Breezer. *The Lost Tapes Volume One* was shared under the name Alsie using Liam Gallagher's voice in a production that was well received by the OG Gallagher himself. "I sound mega," the 50-year-old said in a tweet.

Back across the Atlantic, technology philosopher-come-musician Grimes is fully embracing the innovation, and in an effort to score herself a chart hit, stated on Twitter that she would "split 50% royalties on any successful AI-generated song that uses my voice". "Same deal as I would with any artist I collab[orate] with," she continued, "Feel free to use my voice without penalty." Although she drew the line at any racist or Nazi-supporting lyrics, adding that she "may do copyright takedowns ONLY for rly rly toxic lyrics". How very conscientious of her, but what determines 'rly rly toxic lyrics' is perhaps more worrying given her former partner's less-than-salubrious outlook towards social media ownership.

Away from voice-pirating, from the less convincing Whitney Houston hologram tour to the widely celebrated ABBA *Voyage* show, seeing pop icons in concert via digital technology is also changing our experience of what 'live' music means. What happens next in the grey area that allows an unknown bedroom producer to recalibrate a star's voice into all-new music will no doubt be dictated by the music industry's desire to protect its patch – not least after it got caught short a decade ago by the rise in people illegally downloading music online.

One certainty remains: with each innovation in technology, artists have always been the biggest losers, with ever-diminishing returns for their art. From the miniscule income derived from streaming to the collapse of physical music sales, over the years, increasing value has been placed on the live music experience.

Like streaming, AI-produced music is here to stay. How the music industry handles its arrival is yet to be seen; where and how AI develops and changes the music industry is anyone's guess. For now, we can enjoy the gimmick of AI-created fan music for what it is – an escape – in the same way that fan fiction has existed online since the dawn of the internet.

At the end of the day, authenticity always wins through. The live music experience of standing in a field or under the roof of a grand concert hall while watching your favourite artist interact and engage with thousands of appreciative fans is a constant that has carried itself throughout the history of music. With AI you don't get those precious intimate moments – from an ocean of fans helping Lewis Capaldi complete his hit 'Someone You Loved' after he experienced Tourette's symptoms on stage, to piles of knickers being tossed at Tom Jones.

As festival season kicks in with new artists taking to the stage while legends like Elton John bow out, one thing is for certain: our music venues and the live experience they bring is the cornerstone of an extraordinary industry that delivers a key ingredient with each performance – emotion. That's something AI can't quite bottle and sell you back. Yet.

CLIFF JOANNOU
EDITOR IN CHIEF

ON THE COVER



PHOTOGRAPHY BY KOSMAS PAVLOS
CREATIVE AND STYLING BY JOSEPH KOCHARIAN

CILLIAN WEARS FULL LOOK BY SAINT LAURENT

HAIR AND MAKEUP BY GARETH BROMELL
AT WALTER SCHUPFER MANAGEMENT
USING PATRICKS
FASHION ASSISTANT AARON PANDHER



PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHELLE HELENA JANSSEN

CREATIVE AND STYLING BY JOSEPH KOCHARIAN

LOYLE WEARS DENIM JACKET AND JEANS BY CORTEIZ RULES THE WORLD, T-SHIRT BY PRO CLUB AT BLACKSMITHS, RING BY PAWNSHOP, TORHILL HI BY CLARKS

HAIR BY ROSIE-GRACE SMITH USING PATTERN BEAUTY AND BOUCLEME
MAKEUP BY MAYA MAN USING DR BARBARA STRUM'S DARKER SKIN TONES COLLECTION
FASHION ASSISTANT AARON PANDHER

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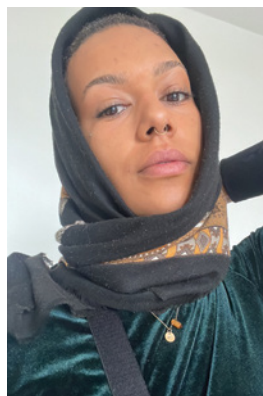
Contributors



Michelle Hélène Janssen

PHOTOGRAPHER

I love working with music artists because they always bring a specific personality into the set, so no matter the creative direction we end up going with, I need to be flexible and work with whatever vibe the artist brings. I prefer it that way, though; it teaches me to let go of expectations. I want to capture someone's essence authentically, and Loyle Carner came across as someone who is very open, calm, kind and charming. In general, even though I'm introverted, I am easily enchanted by people. Humans are incredible and it's easy for me to find something to be captivated by in every person I meet. There's also something really intimate about establishing your relationship on set with your subject, and I'm honoured that Loyle was so open to everything we were trying and that I got to create these photos with him. (Despite him and myself having hayfever on set and sneezing constantly because of the flowers, and despite my unhinged Spotify playlist and him actually vibing to it.) Most of the photos are the moments just after or before he took on a pose and I love these little opportunities, they look genuine.



Rosie Grace-Smith

HAIR ARTIST

I developed my hair skills firstly on myself as growing up in Asia there was zero representation for people that look like me. I think this is why I am so passionate today, because we are still nowhere near being fair and equal in the hair industry.

I have been braiding hair for over seven years, and in the past six months, I have had the opportunity to work closely with Loyle Carner on a number of occasions.

I am a fan of Carner's work and, as a mixed-race woman, I identify with it; his music speaks so well to the nuances of the mixed-race experience. It was truly a dream come true to work with such a talented artist – and then to find out he's a really safe guy, who is easy to chat with, bonus! Juggling the demands of salon life and working on shoots can be challenging, but it's all worth it when you get to work with amazing people like Loyle. The energy on set that day was very chilled, from the music to the energy, and the whole team worked together to create something truly special.



Christina Newland

FILM AND CULTURE WRITER

I first watched Cillian Murphy when he played an idealistic young Irish republican in Ken Loach's drama *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*. He has never stopped innovating and testing himself as an actor since then. As a film critic (and a first-season adopter of *Peaky Blinders*), I have remained in awe of his skill and variability as an actor. His latest role as *Oppenheimer* is just one example of this (I'd like to thank Professor Dan Cordle of Nottingham Trent University, specialist in nuclear-age literature, who helped me prepare for my interview with Murphy). In life, Murphy is as thoughtful and committed as one might expect of an actor who has never chosen the easy path. Perhaps one of the more surreal moments of my year so far was when Cillian sent me a list of his Dublin recommendations so I could go to his favourite pub in the city centre, but my favourite thing was seeing him onset, in work mode, where he never stops spouting fresh ideas. It was genuinely thrilling.

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CONTRIBUTORS

Athian Akec, Mark Beaumont, Mark Cant, Matt Charlton, Oli Coleman, Michael Dunbabin, Hannah Ewens, Rachel Felder, Taylor Glasby, Joe Goggins, Mark Harris, Brian Hiatt, El Hunt, Michelle Hélène Janssen, Charlotte Krol, Alex Morris, Jason Motlagh, Christina Newland, Alana O'Herlihy, Larisha Paul, Kosmas Pavlos, Petros, Dan Pierce, David Pollock, Gemma Samways, Alan Sepinwall, Anna Smith, Jamie Tabberer, Samantha Tellez, SM Entertainment, Ann Wallace

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The Cowshed, Ladycross Farm, Hollow Lane,
Dormansland, Surrey RH7 6PB.
01342 872 020

firstname.surname@rollingstone.co.uk

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FEARS
BRISTOL

Opening Act

Page-turner

Actor James Norton (pictured), model, singer and author Karen Elson, and model Arthur Gosse steal the show in *The Library Spirit* — Episode: London, the latest of Montblanc's stylish photo campaigns inspired by extraordinary literary destinations. The images explore the quiet peace of a classic British library amid the bustling multicultural backdrop of London — both settings in which Montblanc's products are perfectly at home. Every piece in the Meisterstück range — including the Around The World in 80 Days Doué Classique Fountain Pen, Soft Backpack, Soft 24/7 Bag and Montblanc 1858 Iced Sea watch — is imbued with the romantic notions of learning, travel and exploration. The Soft Mini Bag, with its external instrument holder, was even inspired by the art of writing. With these carefully crafted accessories at your fingertips, the world of words is yours to explore.

MONTBLANC.COM



PHOTOGRAPHY MARIANO VIVANCO

Sing it loud

If you've ever grabbed your hairbrush and sung to an empty room like you've just sold out Wembley, then the V&A's latest exhibition is going to be right up your street. From 24 June, Diva will celebrate the enduring power of iconic vocalists, while exploring how this kind of performer found their roots in Victorian opera stars. Featuring an array of fashion, music and photography as well as uncovering the wider impact of these legendary artists, it's set to be a powerful tribute to the diva that lives inside all of us.

VAM.AC.UK

WHITNEY HOUSTON PERFORMING AT
WEMBLEY ARENA, LONDON, 5 MAY
1988. PHOTO © DAVID CORIO

Opening Act

Patch it up

Percival have travelled across the Atlantic to team up once more with American sportswear giants Champion. For their Spring/Summer capsule, the British brand have taken inspiration from their homegrown roots in Soho and the badges of old Scout uniforms to create the embroidery details which adorn the collection of Champion sweatshirts and joggers. Blending the modern with the nostalgic, Percival always gets it just right.

PERCIVALCLO.COM



Ring the changes

A favourite with the fashion press as well as celebrities including Lana Del Rey, Sam Fender and Little Simz, Pawnshop's vintage and recycled fashion jewellery has brought a breath of fresh, cool air when it comes to accessorising. With a treasure trove of gold and sterling-silver pieces, Pawnshop's range exudes a nostalgic vibe that's truly authentic, with signet rings, earrings, charms and even diamonds. And for an extra-special retro touch, the trinkets come in forest-green, crushed-velvet jewellery boxes. We're sold.

PAWNLONDON.COM

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK CANT - WORDS BY JOSEPH KOCHARIAN - MODEL - MAKITO UCHIDA AT SUPA MODEL MANAGEMENT - HAIR AND MAKEUP BY VIOLETA COMAN AT GARY REPRESENTS USING DIOR FANTASIE

Looking to the future

For Spring/Summer 23, Clarks are continuing to champion social change with their 'For the World Ahead' campaign. It sees poet and model Sonny Hall (pictured), model and ambassador Jourdan Dunn, and Royal Ballet principal dancer Marcelino Sambé walk us through their personal stories and visions of the future while wearing the brand's new Torhill range, which has been reworked with a Y2K chunky sole that gives us all the 90s feels. The artists' talk of their memories of yesterday and their hopes for tomorrow is a perfect fit for the modern yet retro Torhill style.

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Note perfect

What is music for if not to inspire, be that emotionally or physically. And when it comes to Roland, a world-leading innovator of electronic instruments, it's a spur for creativity, too. Presenting the company's 50th-anniversary concept model, Roland continue to reinvent the acoustic piano through pioneering electronic tech, while honouring the instrument's sound and history. Offering a 360-degree speaker system, the concept piano is able to relay sound in any direction through its 14 strategically placed, adjustable speakers, while the sound field around it is enhanced by drone speakers that float above. Combining improved audio quality with a stunning finish, the concept piano's one-piece, moulded, wooden body, designed in collaboration with Japanese furniture maker Karimoku and made from Japanese oak, was inspired by a fusion of the past and the future. Although not for sale, it offers a vision of how far the imagination of Roland's design and engineering team can stretch. Boundary-pushing, elegant and bold, it is the absolute essence of what it means to make beautiful music.

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WHAT'S NEW, WHAT'S NEXT, WHAT'S NUTS

Straight from the heart

*East London soul singer
Debbie talks collaborating
with Wretch 32 and Stormzy
and how music is her
mouthpiece*



FOR SINGER DEBBIE — real name Debbie Ehirim — music has been the ultimate release. “My own music is my truth and it allows me to express myself so unapologetically,” she says. “If I had to describe myself, it would be as an artist that is genuinely just here for the music. I don’t really focus on anything outside of that. Whatever I put out, that’s what is on my mind.”

As “a lover of singing” and music in general, Debbie grew up on a diet of gospel music and song. Artists such as Lauryn Hill allowed the artist to finally discover her calling, leading her to become one of the UK’s hottest musical prospects.

With collaborations with Stormzy under her belt and nods of approval from John Legend and Mahalia, 2023 looks to be hers for the taking. Here, Debbie opens up about her journey.

How’s your year been so far?

There’s a cool buzz with me and my team because we’re working on the next steps, so that’s exciting — to decide whether I want to do an EP or if I want to put two or three songs out there.

The last we heard from you was the remix of ‘Is This Real Love?’. Is that an interpolation of J Hus’ ‘Did You See’ on there?

It is! I already wrote the song, but after speaking with my label Def Jam, they had the idea of throwing some UK culture in there. I’d been working with Wretch 32 as well, who helped give me a springboard and different ideas of how we can add that UK flavour. Together, we came up with that.

What’s it been like working with Wretch 32? He’s such a stalwart of British rap.

He’s just so down to earth and so lovely. He feels like an uncle, you can go to him about pretty much anything and he’ll have really good advice. I’m glad he’s been a part of this journey.

You’re signed to 0207 Def Jam, the UK arm of an iconic name. It’s barely three years old — what’s it like being part of such an exciting label?

Even though they’re a major label, they allow you to feel very much like it’s an independent. I’ve never felt any pressure and they’ve always made it really vocal that’s the case. It feels like everything is happening in its own time and we’re in it for the long run. That’s a comforting thing.

Where does your love of music come from?

VOICE ARTIST

Debbie grew up singing gospel and cites Lauryn Hill as her inspiration



It stemmed from singing and I would say that's been my escape for a very long time. When I was younger, I would genuinely just close my eyes and sit in a spot and sing for hours. I had a very limited amount of music I was able to listen to and it was mainly gospel, but occasionally I'd hear people playing Adele songs, so I'd cover those too. It was really whatever I could get my hands on.

What's your song-writing process been like? Your lyrics seem personal.

My method is to try not to overthink and just to get lost in it. You know sometimes when you vent, and you don't actually realise what was inside or how you're feeling? But once you finish venting, you suddenly realise how much you needed it. That's what writing is like for me.

One of your biggest break-out moments came when 'Cherry Wine' arrived last year. What's the story behind that song?

That was a space I was in at the time where I was being invited to a lot of events and sometimes I find I'm a bit of a sheep. I found when I left those events, I felt low and really drained. 'Cherry Wine' was me wanting to talk about how I'm not really built for all of this. I'm very awkward and sometimes I need a bit of a drink to get me through! I liked that people were able to see the vulnerability in it.

Aside from your own music, last year saw you collab with Stormzy on 'Firebabe'. What was it like recording with him?

I went to his album camp at Osea Island in Essex. You know, sometimes in London you find that the session world is very repetitive, and it can be super fast-paced. But it was just nice to feel like you're basically on holiday. Working with him was just a wholesome, lovely and loving experience.

Were you friends beforehand?

We'd been connected by his A&R who is now the head of Def Jam, and once he heard some of my tracks he wanted to work together. We've been writing music and it's just been nice that he's enjoyed the music.

Bearing in mind everything he's achieved, has he given you any tips for navigating your career?

He's given brilliant advice about how to own your own craft and also, like, the understanding of the gift I have and that we as artists are vessels. We've been given a gift and our job is to give that out to the world as unfiltered as possible. He just gasses me, and it gives me a lot of confidence and encouragement in what I'm doing.

Even when we're recording, he gives me room to become a little bit introverted



“We’ve been given a gift and our job is to give that out to the world”

in order to connect to what I'm doing. He gives space to allow that.

You say you're introverted. Music must be a brilliant release for that.

Oh yeah, 100 per cent. Sometimes I've told people how I feel about them through music. I tend to express myself through music because I can say everything I need to through it.

At what point did you realise you wanted to make a career of it?

I've always realised that it's been my escape, but it was when I realised just how relieved songwriting could make me feel. Then in my first year of uni, I was studying business, I met my manager and he put me into sessions. That was the first time I'd utilised my songwriting in an actual professional sense.

Have you managed to take stock of the journey so far?

I'm just learning to be present and also be reflective when there's not a lot going on. Sometimes you get a couple of days to just chill and I try to make it a thing to reflect, and actually give myself a pat

on the back because you kind of forget to do that.

You're a big Lauryn Hill fan too?

I love her! I'd always known her because of the movie *Sister Act*, bearing in mind I wasn't allowed to listen to music that wasn't gospel, so that's literally all I knew until I was about 16 and I didn't know she was an artist outside of that. It was someone from Def Jam who told me to listen to *Miseducation* and I just got consumed by that album. It's timeless, and inspirational for me how [she] was able to tackle real topics but do it in such a seamless, classy, musical way. I learned a lot from her album. I watch some of her seminars and her lectures and she has such an interesting philosophy on life in general.

What's next for you?

At the moment, I'm working on music, but I think the next release needs to feel really big and a bit more purposeful. I pride myself in being able to go between genres too and to be true to whatever genre I'm listening to. I would love to share that in my music. **NICK REILLY**



Jordan Adetunji

On recent single 'You & I', this Belfast artist proves himself to be a true musical polymath who melds together elements of frenetic hyperpop and more contemporary club sounds. He's also attracted fans in high places, having signed to RCA Records on the suggestion of Bring Me the Horizon's Oli Sykes.

Lucia & The Best Boys

Glasgow's Lucia Fairfull is turning out to be one of 2023's newest and most memorable voices within UK rock. The debut album arrives later this year, but recent single 'When You Dress Up' pairs thunderous post-rock soundscapes with lyrics that tackle "the weight of the male gaze, and learning not to suppress our own identity for the sake of another person's version of who we should be". Powerful stuff.

Blake Rose

After supporting Mimi Webb on her tour, Blake Rose is making waves in his own right. His recent single 'Don't Stop the Car' is an irresistible, 80s-influenced alt-pop tune, with the likes of Jack Saunders and Clara Amfo providing radio support. You can expect to hear him on those airwaves even more throughout 2023.

Cowboy

Despite the western-sounding name, there's no yeehaws to be found here. Instead, Cowboy deal in math-rock and art-pop-infused sounds that are consistently arresting. 'Tennis', taken from their debut EP *Epic The Movie*, is a real standout.

Wasia Project

The musical project of *Heartstopper* star Will Gao and his sister Olivia, Wasia Project sees the siblings mining their mixed British-East Asian heritage and classical training to write songs that incorporate a diverse mix of genres. Their latest, the stunning 'Petals on the Moon', is an outstanding slice of modern jazz-pop.

Anish Kumar

Hotly tipped by Four Tet, 22-year-old DJ Anish is already shaping up to be a star of the future. 'Hummingbird', a recent track of his, flits between classic electronica and more modern sounds to bring together ravers old and new.

Lambrini Girls

If you want proof of just how good Lambrini Girls are, look no further than Iggy Pop, who recently pronounced the Brighton duo his favourite band and invited them to perform at his own curated festival in Crystal Palace this summer. The trio offer riot grrl-indebted punk with a hard-hitting message. Last year's single 'Help Me I'm Gay' — an ode to living your truth — excellently conveys what they're all about.

Iraina Mancini

Iraina Mancini leans heavily into 60s-style retro pop sounds while also injecting a modern edge. 'Cannonball', one of her best new releases, is

inspired by a "60s stylish thriller film", she reveals.

"I wrote 'Cannonball' about taking a chance in life and following your heart. It's that moment where you meet someone or something and it knocks you for six!" says the Londoner.

Heriot

Swindon-via-Birmingham band Heriot are doing an impressive job of showing why they're one of British metal's hottest prospects. Their latest release 'Demure' is an unrelenting journey into the loud, unpredictable and brilliant parts of their riff-filled world.

Strandz

'Us Against the World' may have been the moment that UK rap first properly tuned into Strandz, but the south London star cemented that reputation even further when a Digga D remix followed earlier this year. It's all testament to the rapper's distinctive vibe, which harks back to the melodic, sample-filled glory days of early 00s rap while also incorporating his own personal stamp. "It's not like I want to replicate what hip hop was, I want to add something to it so I've actually had an effect on the sound," he recently told *Dazed*.

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MUSIC

Preaching to the converted

Since acquiring an online following during the first Covid lockdown, indie-rock newcomers Lovejoy reflect on the challenge they were faced with: to win over their fan base IRL

By MARK BEAUMONT

WHEN THE 1,500 teenagers crammed into Brixton Electric scream – and boy, do they scream – it's with the celebratory thrill of finding the Golden Ticket, the jackpot scratch card, the rarest Pokémon. After two years of tracking them down through obscure open mikes and unsigned nights, they've finally found *the band*.

"We did a few secret, underground pseudo-gigs under false names at the beginning," says Lovejoy singer William Gold, ears still ringing from the roof-lifting response to his band's first full-on European tour, taking in everywhere from Glasgow to Gdansk. After becoming a YouTube sensation during lockdown – with 1.3 million subscribers and streams into the tens of millions, but zero gigs under their belts – what this humble indie-rock four-piece from Brighton didn't want to do was "a really crap gig in front of a massive crowd and completely bomb", explains Gold.

For their first gig, they were Lamp With Sock. For their second, they chose ASBO Barbeque, "because they banned barbecues

on the beach in Brighton, which I thought was ridiculous". But by the time they took the stage for their third-ever show, as Ouija Board Madness, they'd been rumbled.

"The fan base had cottoned onto the fact that we were playing under the pseudonyms," says bassist Ash Kabosu, "and were actively seeking line-ups with bands on that they couldn't find any information about and just turning up to the shows. By the third show, it was sold out. It was wall-to-wall, everyone's going crazy. We did zero advertising whatsoever, and they found us."

Backstage at the Electric, sweaty, buzzing and full of tour flu, Lovejoy – completed by guitarist Joe Goldsmith and drummer Mark Boardman – might easily be mistaken for any average gang of indie-rock sloggers catapulted to their first flush of success by a glowing endorsement from Gus from Alt-J on Steve Lamacq's *Roundtable*. Instead, they're something of an IndieGPT revolution. Gold initially found fame on Twitch and YouTube under the online pseudonym Wilbur Soot, a key player in a *Minecraft* community called Dream SMP, where participants created a dramatic historical saga storyline within the game, featuring warring nations, noble quests and more than a few nods to *Hamilton*.

Several players streamed the music they were making in their bedrooms, too – Gold had been posting internet-themed relationship songs online since 2018 – and the millions of *Minecrafters* who flocked to the streams during the first Covid lockdown lapped it up so avidly that Dream SMP became a genuine Spotify genre. Premiered on Twitch, Gold's sixth single 'Your New Boyfriend' made it to number 65 in 2020 and trended on Twitter in the US.

"Over the span of 2018 and 2019, I wrote a solo album about how I was coming to hate living in London at the time," says Gold. "When Covid hit, I lost a lot of my inspiration, being locked inside. It's hard to get that connection to the world that you do need in lyrics

and music. As we were coming out of what I thought was the end of Covid in 2021 – I know that sounds crazy now – I decided, 'I want to get back into my passion, what I started out with.' And I had the ever-blessed fact that I had this audience behind me now that wanted to hear what I was up to. They supported my music from the beginning, since back when I'd sing on stream to a 100 viewers all the way up to 100,000 viewers. Our first gig under our name, it was mind-blowing to be able to put those faces to all these lovely words you see on the internet. I feel like the human brain isn't designed to take that on board."

Thus the instant viral success that is Lovejoy ignited a back-to-front sort of phenomenon. "A lot of musicians have to start out writing good songs, and then they get the audience," Gold says. "We've done it the other way around. We've been given this incredible audience and now I feel like I'm constantly trying to prove to them, I'm trying to give back the love that they've



SECRET'S OUT
(From left) Ash
Kabosu, Joe
Goldsmith,
William Gold
and Mark
Boardman



given to us.”

At the forefront of the next wave of the burgeoning alt-pop revival (following Wolf Alice, Sam Fender and Wet Leg), Lovejoy mark the pivot point where rock music becomes web-savvy enough to play the algorithm at its own game and subvert the streaming pop hegemony from within. And being so long removed from the push and pull of reactive indie scenes gone by, Lovejoy’s three EPs to date – 2021’s *Are You Alright?* and *Pebble Brain*, and the forthcoming *Wake Up & It’s Over* – are also able to feast freely on just as broad a historical buffet, taking snippets of influence from across the alt-rock decades.

Over an electrifying hour at the Electric, bolstered by a brass duo and a casual confidence, they

mix’n’match elements of The Smiths, Arctic Monkeys, Orange Juice, The Cure, The Rapture, Franz Ferdinand, Blur, The Strokes and the more paisley-shirted end of C86.

Their sing-along Gen Z following lap it up, enraptured by songs which speak to both their emotional and political dislocation. The vignettes of modern relationships on the



“A lot of musicians have to start out writing good songs, and then they get the audience,” Gold says. “We’ve done it the other way around”

Are You Alright? EP – with all their insecurities, paranoias and Tory parents – reflected Gold’s inherent “disillusion with romance”, while *Pebble Brain*, he explains, was his “breakup with England”. Its tracks include ‘The Fall’, a funk-punk portrait of medicated middle England and the bigotry it breeds. ‘You’ll Understand When You’re Older’ took sly digs at Matt Hancock’s many shades of in-office fumbling, while ‘Model Buses’ is introduced live as simply “a song about Boris Johnson”.

“That was written around the time that he was having his little parties at Number 10,” Gold says, “and with my mum being an absolute, avid hater of the Conservative Party her entire life, I thought, ‘What would my mum think if I went on a night out with Boris Johnson if he wasn’t Prime Minister, just a guy?’ So it’s a very ironic description of this greasy, Conservative man trying to pick up girls at a pub and me ridiculing

them in a sarcastic, tongue-in-cheek kind of way. I wasn’t too happy with [the pandemic response] as you can probably tell, but there’s not much that the Conservative Party have done that I have been happy with.”

No wonder then that the new EP features a song called ‘It’s Golden Hour Somewhere’, dreaming of a less drizzly, less Tory, but distinctly shallower life. “I’ve always wanted to live in America,” Gold confides. “I want to try it before I die. ‘Golden Hour’... is almost the fear of what I’ll become if I were to move to Los Angeles. When I was in LA, you meet a lot of people who are quite fake and it’s almost a commentary on ‘Oh God, I hope I don’t become that.’”

In the meantime, Lovejoy are stuck dealing with one of the less predictable effects of Brexit – intimate chafing. “We had the option to get held up at Dover for 50 hours,” says Gold, “so we booked some surprisingly cheap last-minute flights through Oslo.”

“I lost an entire duffel bag of underwear,” Kabosu confesses. “I currently don’t have any pants or socks, but we’re dealing with it.” A secret gig as Captain Commando no doubt awaits... @

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Chloë Bailey Faces the Spotlight

MAKING A SOLO DEBUT wasn't easy for Chloë Bailey, but she's proud she got there. "There were so many people in my life — I'm not talking about online internet trolls, but people I was close to — who told me I couldn't do this," says the singer, 24, who released her album, *In Pieces*, in March. "Who said I wouldn't be good enough to do this on my own. That was scary as shit actually doing it, because there were times where I believed them. I believed the negative things being told to me. I just had to keep trusting myself." **LARISHA PAUL**

Bailey backstage at ACL Live at the Moody Theater in Austin



FILMS

Way of the Gunn: Inside *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3*

The Marvel franchise's writer-director and stars on its final chapter – and whether it's really the end

By BRIAN HIATT

EVEN BY THE roller-coaster standards of Hollywood career arcs, the last few chapters of writer-director James Gunn's working life have been truly weird – like, talking-space-raccoon, walking-tree-level weird. In July 2018, right-wing trolls unearthed

some of his old, deliberately edgy joke tweets, leading Disney to fire him from the third chapter of his *Guardians of the Galaxy* saga for Marvel Studios. Gunn was convinced his career was over, that he'd have to sell his house. Five years later, his *Guardians of*

the Galaxy Vol. 3 is here, and he's risen from brief unemployment and purported disgrace to showbiz moguldom as the newly appointed co-CEO, co-chairman, and creative guardian of Marvel's rival, Warner Bros.' DC Studios. He's writing and directing a Superman movie, due in 2025, to boot.

"When I reflect on it, it's unusual," says Gunn, who began his career at the infamous B-movie horror studio Troma. "But, you

know, life is strange. Is it stranger than going from directing *Tromeo and Juliet* for Troma studios for \$350,000, in which my primary job was to choreograph the sex scenes and pump blood through [a] guy's neck, to making a movie for hundreds of millions of dollars, for a giant studio, that's for all ages? I don't know. That's pretty strange, too."

Within days of Disney firing Gunn in 2018, Warner Bros. pulled

JESSICA MIGLIO/©2023 MARVEL

him into the oft-floundering DC camp to write and direct 2021's *The Suicide Squad*, which led to an excellent TV spinoff, HBO Max's John Cena-starring *Peacemaker*. At the same time, consensus grew that Disney had overreacted, and the *Guardians* cast made it clear that they were, at best, highly reluctant to make a third movie without Gunn, whose comedic skills and off-kilter sensibility had vastly extended the range and viability of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, conjuring two blockbusters out of an intergalactic-outcast saga starring characters even many hardcore Marvel fans barely knew.

"It's been a rocky road to get here," says Karen Gillan, playing against her bubbly real-life personality as the comically grim, blue-skinned, half-cyborg Nebula. "When it looked like we were going to make the movie without James, it just didn't feel right at all. You can't make a *Guardians* movie without James. It wouldn't be a real *Guardians* movie."

In March of 2019, Disney and Marvel Studios quietly rehired Gunn for *Guardians 3*, and he got to work revising the screenplay draft he'd turned in just before his dismissal. The cast was overjoyed, though the movie would have to wait until after he'd made *Suicide Squad*. "The only thing I ever wanted was that James would direct it," says Chris Pratt, who plays *Guardians'* lead character, Peter Quill (aka Star-Lord). "That's all I hoped for. It's a difficult landing to stick, and seeing that we had the blueprint and the right leader to get us there was a real relief."

The movie is, overall, much darker in tone than its oft-comedic predecessors. "It's matured in its emotionality the same way that probably the audience has matured," says Pratt. "The kids who loved *Guardians* were teenagers, and now they're in their mid-twenties, and it's really exciting to think that they're ready for this movie the way that they might not have been nine years ago."

The shift kicks in right at the beginning, with a music choice. "It doesn't start with 'Mr. Blue Sky,'"



TEAMWORK (Opposite) Saldaña as Gamora, Pratt as Star-Lord, Klementieff as Mantis, Gillan as Nebula, and Bautista as Drax; (this page, from top) Gamora has become a fan favourite; (left to right) Bautista, Gillan, Pratt and Klementieff in the latest film

says Gunn. "It doesn't start with 'Come and Get Your Love'. It starts with Radiohead's acoustic version of 'Creep'. And that's just a much different tone from the beginning than the other two films."

Pop songs have always been at the core of *Guardians'* appeal, of course, with the first two movies prominently using 70s hits that were supposed to have been pulled from two cassette mixtapes made by Peter Quill's departed mother. For this one, the songs are pulled from a Microsoft Zune Peter got at the end of *Guardians 2*, which freed Gunn from being restricted to any particular decade – thus making the song choices much

harder for the director.

"It was very, very difficult," Gunn says. "I felt very uncomfortable picking out songs and making sure that this was the right soundtrack. It was much, much harder than other movies. Do I move on to just all 80s songs? Do I use all 90s songs? Or do I do what a Zune would actually have – songs from different eras, which is what I ended up doing." The choices range from Bruce Springsteen's 'Badlands' (which doesn't score the kind of big climactic moment you'd expect, Gunn says) to the Replacements' 'I Will Dare' to Faith No More's 'We Care a Lot' to the Flaming Lips'

"It's been a rocky road to get here. When it looked like we were going to make the movie without James, it just didn't feel right at all. You can't make a *Guardians* movie without James. It wouldn't be a real *Guardians* movie"



MAD GENIUS Gunn calls his career "pretty strange"

'Do You Realize??'.

This is the final *Guardians* movie, at least with the current set of characters, and for Pratt, it's the end of the most important film series of his career. "My entire life is different now because of Marvel, because of the *Guardians of the Galaxy*," says Pratt. "It did change my life in such a way that I've been going nonstop ever since." Before *Guardians*, he was, of course, best known as the hilarious, not particularly fit, not particularly smart Andy Dwyer on *Parks and Recreation*. (Andy was married to April Ludgate, played by Aubrey Plaza, who's about to enter the MCU in her own right, on the upcoming WandaVision spinoff *Agatha: Coven of Chaos*. "That really is full circle," Pratt says.) Pratt got shredded to play Peter Quill – he associates the first film's soundtrack with the "pain" of his weight-loss regime – and began an entirely new career as an action star.

But is he done playing Star-Lord? The answer is convoluted, reflecting his concern about revealing anything about his character's fate in the new movie. In the MCU, he notes, "There's ways for people to come back from the dead. That being said, by saying that I don't feel like I'm done, it shouldn't go into spoiler territory. I don't want that to be like, 'Oh, well, Chris Pratt says that Peter Quill doesn't die.' That's not what I'm saying. What I'm saying is, even if I do die in this, there's a way to bring me back. So if you're talking about like, practically, can Peter Quill come back? The answer will always be yes. Now if you're

saying to me, Chris Pratt the actor, do I want to reprise my role as Peter Quill and is there mileage left in the character and do I have the bandwidth or head space for that? I do. I'd be interested in playing the character again."

Reflecting the precise dead-but-not-dead complexities he's referring to, his love interest in the previous movies, Zoe Saldana's Gamora, is now a version from another timeline who never fell in love with him in the first place. Hilariously, one of the trailers hints at a possible flirtation between Peter and Gillan's seemingly emotionless killer Nebula. ("I never noticed how black your eyes are," Peter tells her.) "That was a little bit of a curveball," says Gillan, who long ago built Nebula's voice on Gunn's request for a simultaneous impression of Marilyn Monroe and Clint Eastwood. "Though maybe she really harboured a secret crush this whole time. We don't know."

In *Guardians 3*, we meet Nebula in a new phase in her life, finally free from her monstrously abusive adopted dad, Thanos, the now thoroughly dead character who snapped half of the universe away in *Avengers: Infinity War*. "We're starting to see her heal a little bit and develop the personality that was maybe put on hold," says Gillan. "There's so many layers to someone who's suffered that kind of trauma." She's also eager to keep playing Nebula – but has no idea if the MCU has any place for her going forward.

Gunn likes to say that the *Guardians* movies have a "secret protagonist", one who's about three feet tall, sounds a lot like Bradley Cooper, and will laser-blast you if you mention his strong resemblance to a terrestrial raccoon. Among many other developments, *Guardians 3* will reveal the dark origin of Rocket (yes, voiced by Cooper), which seems to be tied into experiments conducted by one of the movie's key new characters, the High Evolutionary (Chukwudi Iwuj). For Gunn, the wounded, sarcastic, lonely Rocket is the character he relates to most, on "a very core level".

"I was always a kid that didn't quite belong in the group," he

A Sneak Peek at the GOG Vol. 3 Soundtrack

1. Radiohead, 'Creep (Acoustic Version)'

"My favourite version," Gunn says. "It's hardly been distributed."

2. Spacehog, 'In the Meantime'

"There's something about Brit-pop songs that works really well in outer space."

3. The Replacements, 'I Will Dare'

"They're one of my all-time favourite bands."



FANTASY FACEOFF (From top) Peter (Chris Pratt) with Iwuj as the High Evolutionary; Will Poulter makes his debut as villain Adam Warlock in the new *Guardians* film

says. "I was a punk-rock kid, but I totally didn't see everything the way [punks] saw it. Rocket had his own traumas early on. And the way he learned to deal with them was kind of being tougher than leather, and mean and angry. And that came in response to the things that you learn happened to him in volume three."

As the voice of Rocket, Cooper leans into the darkness this time, Gunn says. "This is the best he's ever been. There's some stuff... that's just chilling."

When the first *Guardians* came out in 2014, the MCU was in an expansionary mode, and possibilities seemed limitless. Now, whispers of "superhero fatigue" have grown louder than ever in the wake of the disappointments of Marvel's *Quantumania* and DC's *Shazam! Fury of the Gods*. "I think there is such a thing as superhero fatigue," Gunn says. "I think it doesn't have anything to do with



PRATT FALL “My entire life is different” because of *Guardians*, says Pratt, whose character Peter is pictured getting a lift from Nebula (Gillan)

superheroes. It has to do with the kind of stories that get to be told and if you lose your eye on the ball, which is character. We love Superman. We love Batman, we love Iron Man, because they’re these incredible characters that we have in our hearts. And if it becomes just a bunch of nonsense onscreen, it gets really boring.

“But I get fatigued by most spectacle films,” he continues, “by the grind of not having an emotionally grounded story. It doesn’t have anything to do with whether they’re superhero movies or not. If you don’t have a story at the base of it, just watching things bash each other, no matter how clever those bashing moments are, no matter how clever the designs and the VFX are, it just gets fatiguing. And I think that’s very, very real.”

That said, Gunn never saw *Guardians* as a superhero story in the first place. “It’s a space

opera,” he says. “A family drama.” When he made the first movie, in fact, he was thinking of another Disney-owned property altogether. “I felt like movies were getting a little repetitive,” he says, “and you needed a science-fiction epic that was colourful and bright, what *Star Wars* was to me when I was 11. Instead of a Chewbacca and a C-3PO, it was a talking tree and a gun-wielding raccoon. I felt like I was putting something out there that was going to work. Which doesn’t mean that in the middle of shooting, I didn’t wake up at 3am in a cold, sweaty panic.”

“There is such a thing as superhero fatigue. It has to do with if you lose your eye on the ball, which is character. We love Superman. We love Batman, we love Iron Man, because they’re these incredible characters”

For the *Guardians 3* cast – which also includes returning stars Dave Bautista as Drax, Pom Klementieff as Mantis, and Vin Diesel as the voice of Groot, along with newcomers like Will Poulter as the superpowered cosmic character Adam Warlock – the experience of completing their story after nine years was so emotional that it spilled into the finished film. “There’s a scene towards the end of the film that’s somewhat of an ending-of-an-era scene,” says Gillan. “And everyone was crying in the scene. When you see it, just know that none of us

are actually acting. Like, everyone was very emotional. It did feel like a goodbye. And it felt real.”

But Gunn isn’t done with the cast. He’s made it clear he hopes to work with as many of them as possible in new roles at DC, and both Gillan and Pratt say they’re open to that. Gunn, meanwhile, will take the lessons of *Guardians* into his new universe, and perhaps his Superman movie in particular. “I learned so much from making these movies,” he says. “But it’s not like Superman is going to have exactly the same vibe as a *Guardians* movie. It’s actually quite different.” That said, does his success with Rocket make him more interested in possibly taking a chance on the first live-action cinematic version of Superman’s pet, Krypto the Superdog? He laughs. “I think I would have an interest in a live-action Krypto whether or not I had anything to do with Rocket,” he says. @



Making up her own rules

*Londoner Olivia Dean has called her debut album **Messy**, a title which reflects her eclectic, authentic approach to music as well as her status as a young adult forging her way in the world*

By GEMMA SAMWAYS

DESPITE REPORTS OF a heavy one last night, Olivia Dean is impressively chipper first thing on a Thursday morning. “I’m just very, very happy at the moment,” the 24-year-old singer-songwriter grins, speaking over the patchy Wi-Fi connection of a recording studio just outside Hereford.

Currently on a residential writing trip with fellow BRIT School graduate Rachel Chinouriri, Dean definitely has plenty to celebrate. Last week, she completed her biggest-ever tour of the UK and Europe, playing to more than 10,000 fans in total. The week before, she was announced as one of the headliners of Somerset House’s Summer Series, with her show going on to be the first to sell out. Most excitingly, just 24 hours before we speak, she announced her long-awaited debut album, *Messy*, currently set for release at the end of June.

Written and recorded with Lianne La Havas-collaborator Matt Hales, the 12-track collection looks set to cement the south London-based star’s reputation as one of the UK’s brightest young voices – not to mention surprise a few people with the scope of her vision. Informed by influences as diverse as Clairo, Carole King and Mac Miller, the songwriting on display extends

from the pared-back piano balladry of ‘Everybody’s Crazy’ to the more maximalist, Motown shimmer of ‘Dive’, via the tender, steel pan-dappled grooves of ‘Carmen’.

Dean baulks at the idea that the album’s variety could be viewed in any way as a talking point. “I really struggle with the idea [that] I’m supposed to make one kind of music,” she shrugs. “For me, there are no rules. And at the end of the day, I’m gonna make what I want to make because I’m too stubborn to be told to make anything else.”

By her own admission, Dean has always been single-minded. Born and raised in Walthamstow, she knew she wanted to be a singer by the age of eight, after watching the success of her cousin – the rapper and actor Ashley Walters – from afar. Her parents further nurtured her love of music, introducing her to a broad range of artists, from Jill Scott to Joni Mitchell, enrolling her in musical theatre classes and tracking down a second-hand piano so she could start songwriting.

At 14, Dean won a place at The BRIT School, an achievement testament not just to her talent, but to the ambition and tenacity instilled in her by her mum, a lawyer and member of the Women’s Equality Party. “She was always like, ‘You can do whatever you want to do,’” Dean

recalls proudly. “And I think that’s a really important message for a child. So I’ve always thought that if I want to do something and I just keep saying I’m going to do it, then I can just do it. I don’t know if that’s delusional, but I guess you have to be a bit delusional sometimes to get things done.”

During her first two years at BRIT, Dean studied musical theatre, before joining Rex Orange County, Black Midi and Raye on the music strand for the second half of her studies. At her final showcase, Dean was approached by her now-manager, who put her forward to audition as a backing singer for Rudimental. She was amazed to get the job.

“The first show we did was at Sziget Festival in Budapest in front of around 16,000 people,” she recalls, still in disbelief. “Like, I had literally just come out of college and I was doing all these crazy shows and getting this invaluable performance experience. But I don’t think I have the skill of a backing singer, so that was never going to be my final destination.”

Following the tour, she was accepted to study popular music at Goldsmiths, but quit after three weeks, worried that analysing the technicalities of songwriting would cause her to second-guess her own creative instincts. “I think it was a good choice,” she says, adding with



LIFE STORY
Olivia Dean
says *Messy*, the
title of her new
album, sums up
her life now

a laugh, “Even if I do still have to pay off my student loan.”

Dean remains in south London and continues to immerse herself in the local creative scene, attending jazz nights by Steam Down in Deptford as well as Raw Eggs, a monthly event with participants showcasing everything from film to stand-up comedy and clowning. Today, she lights up when discussing her love of live performance.

“I’m like a live music sponge, I think it’s just the best thing ever. To have everybody in the room, all coming from their separate lives, and then joining together in this crazy shared experience, singing, dancing, crying... It’s 100 per cent my favourite thing.”

Dean’s profile has grown exponentially over the past five years, with the release of EPs *Ok Love You Bye* (2019), *What Am I Gonna Do on Sundays* (2020) and *Growth* (2021). Indeed, when it came to writing *Messy*, *Growth* initially proved something of a millstone around Dean’s neck. “Starting this album, I was like, ‘Well, the last EP was called

“When I wrote the song ‘Messy’, it became obvious to me that I really enjoy imperfection”

Growth, so this album needs to be about what I’ve grown into.’ And I was like, ‘I actually don’t know what that is.’ But once I removed the pressure of having to be at my destination it was OK. This album is me saying, ‘This is where I’m at now: kind of a mess but loving it.’”

Messy was written over a period of 18 months, and recorded in just two weeks in October 2022, at The Pool Recording Studio near Elephant and Castle. It was important to Dean to record in her hometown, so as to provide an accurate snapshot of her identity as an artist.

Authenticity has always been a watchword in Dean’s songwriting, which sees her relaying real stories in a conversational tone rather than couched in metaphors or symbolism. This preference for naturalism over

abstraction extends to her musical approach too, as she explains.

“I get frustrated with music that feels overly saturated or autotuned or calculated. And when I wrote the song ‘Messy’, it became obvious to me that I really enjoy imperfection. I think it makes things more interesting.”

This human approach lends the record soul and a sense of self-assurance that often belies Dean’s relative youth. “I’m quite a stoic,” she admits. “And I love timeless things. Like, it’s always been my dream to make something that would last, the way I always go back to *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* or [Paul Simon’s] *Graceland* or [Carole King’s] *Tapestry*. They’re like fuel, you know? It’s with you for a moment in your life and you come back to it.”

The songs on *Messy* should provide similar solace to listeners, tackling anxiety (‘Everybody’s Crazy’), love and heartbreak (‘Dangerously Easy’), and independence (‘Ladies Room’). Unquestionably, most touching is album closer ‘Carmen’, which immortalises Dean’s 80-year-old granny, who moved to the UK from Grenada as part of the Windrush generation, and with whom Dean briefly shared a bedroom as a child.

Beginning with a voice note of her granny recalling that journey, Dean coos, “*You transported a family tree and part of it grew to me.*” All shimmering steel pans, dancing guitar lines and buoyant brass, it’s a fitting conclusion to an album that ultimately underscores Dean’s long-term potential.

“I just feel so proud of this album,” she says, beaming. “Proud that I made it exactly the way I wanted to and that I just was unwavering in my creative decisions, you know? I’ve followed my intuition, and I think that’s a really powerful thing. Because if you make a record that you really, really love, you can’t lose.” 📻



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Before he founded Leftfield, Neil Barnes was making music as a DJ. Alongside performing with his relaunched band, it remains his first love, as he tells Rolling Stone UK

AFTER THEIR RAVE-FRIENDLY club anthem 'Not Forgotten' was released in 1990, Leftfield became pioneers of British electronic music production. The duo's Mercury Prize-nominated first albums *Leftism* (1995) and *Rhythm & Stealth* (1999) were key recordings of their era, featuring guest appearances from the Sex Pistols' John Lydon, Roots Manuva and others.

Until they parted ways in 2002, Leftfield was a double act made up

of founder Neil Barnes and Paul Daley. The latter was not involved in Leftfield's return in 2010 following an eight-year hiatus. Barnes now collaborates with Adam Wren, with guest vocalists on last year's fourth album *This Is What We Do* including Fontaines D.C.'s Grian Chatten.

Between live dates with Leftfield – including a UK tour this spring and summer festival appearances at Glastonbury, Secret Garden Party and Bluedot – Barnes returns to his first love: DJing. He discovered it in 1979, drawing influences throughout the early 80s from American groups and producers playing electro and hip-hop, including D Train, Larry Levan, Grandmaster Flash and Soulsonic Force.

"Mixing records was primitive in those days," says Barnes. "I remember first seeing people doing it – taking a vocal beat and keeping it going – in London in around 1986. As soon as we realised what we could do with vinyl, it changed everything. Until then, we just mixed records into the beginning of the last one on Pioneer DJ decks; there was no thought of putting something over the top until hip-hop came along and minimised the beats."

The art of DJing has undergone phenomenal change since those early days, as Barnes reveals below.

How did you move from DJing into music production?

What kicked it off for me was reading

STEVE GULLICK

PARTNERS IN RHYME
Neil Barnes (left) and
Adam Wren



different, they had access to cheaper equipment, because they had a bigger scene and the equipment had filtered down. Orbital used an MMT-8 sequencer as well, it would just play MIDI, there was no CV – gear like that was too expensive. I made a demo and sent it off to Rhythm King records. They got back to me and said they loved it and wanted to release it. We went into this little studio Paul Daley was using in a youth club in Covent Garden, but it had good equipment. I mixed 'Not Forgotten' in there with a guy called Matt Clark. We used that studio for a lot of early Leftfield stuff. Then remixes started to come in, other people wanted us to do stuff.

What had changed for Leftism five years later?

Everything went crazy over a few years. The British house scene really took off and remixing came in, which was our vehicle to success, although most people didn't think the scene would last. It was young and small, and most music was rock music.

We were lucky with Leftism – we worked in a really good studio, and we managed to make the most of it, because most high-end stuff was only available in studios. The album was done on two tracks of audio on a computer, and the rest of it was running live samplers with MIDI onto it, being recorded back into the computer or onto tape. There was a proper mixing desk and a really big monitor system, so we could play it loud. We got it up like a club system, we mixed it for clubs.

How did your set-up evolve?

Our computer used Cubase in those days, and we hired and bought a lot of samplers – we used millions of samples. We hired a 303, bought a couple of primitive early synths – a few things which I don't tell people about because I still use them. We used a Juno-106, an OSCar, a Roland SH-101, a Moog in a box. We gradually

expanded the equipment with reverbs and harmonisers and compressors, but it was still nothing [compared to now]. Computers expanded their power very quickly – every year you'd buy a new one, and gradually over 10 years everything moved into the computer. It's a different world now – there's more power in my phone than we had in our first studio.

What does your studio consist of these days?

We use a combination of software and hardware. We use small modular setups, lots of different sequencers including Logic and Ableton Live, and different tools to get different sounds, like vocoders. I've got some special bits of kit, like a Waldorf Wave keyboard which I've had for years. It's made some amazing string sounds for Leftfield. Then the modern stuff: I'm using the Pioneer DJ Toraiz SP-16 sampler a lot, with a Prophet Filter. It's like an Akai sampler, it's got pads on it and the timing's really good. We also use the Squid sequencer, which is amazing – I wouldn't look further if I was buying a hardware sequencer for dance music at the moment. It's very simple to use and does some really fun things – you can sync it up really quickly with lots of other gear. It's not just Pioneer DJ stuff; a lot of very good plugins and equipment have come out over the past five years. The gap between digital and analogue is zero now.

What are your thoughts on the increasing digitisation of sound over the past 30 years?

Music is made for different environments. A lot of alternative jazz and soul and a lot of techno only comes out on vinyl – it's still got a different sound if it's well done. On the other hand, I've got vinyl that's badly pressed and it sounds poor. Well-cut vinyl is hard to beat, but it has to be well mastered. One of the problems with a lot of digital stuff now is it's overly compressed to get it loud for radio, and a lot of stuff out there has been ruined by bad mastering. It's all down to mastering, and using the equipment properly and subtly. It also depends on the quality of the sound card – they've taken the place of recording machines. To buy a top-quality sound card, a rack unit, can cost between £8,000 and £15,000. There's no cheap answer. People think there is, but there isn't. Making good music can still be an expensive process. **DAVID POLLOCK**

about samplers in the late 80s, although initially they were too expensive. These things cost 60 or 70 grand – they were out of reach for me, but with the miniaturisation of technology they came down in price. My introduction to music was buying an Akai S950 sampler – the upgrade from the S900 – which had a higher bandwidth and was very usable. I bought an Alesis MMT-8 sequencer, an Alesis drum machine, and I borrowed a mixer, and with that I made my first record around 1989.

Tell us how you made 'Not Forgotten'.

I made it in my kitchen – it's true. Most of those early (house) records in the UK were made in really small studios. The American scene was

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The quiet passion

of Cillian Murphy

More than 25 years after his debut, the *Peaky* star remains driven by his craft, bringing an intensity to every part, including his latest as J Robert Oppenheimer, inventor of the atomic bomb. Here, he discusses starring in and producing a film depicting the dark story of Ireland's Magdalene Laundries, as well as reprising his role as Tommy Shelby on the big screen

By Christina Newland

Photography by Kosmas Pavlos
Creative and styling by Joseph Kocharian

THE SUN IS shining in the small riverside town of New Ross, but it's still chilly when the wind bites; a feeble attempt at early spring. It's Good Friday, and I'm standing outside St. Mary's, an imposing defunct

Catholic school in rural County Wexford, Ireland. Crew members scamper towards their lights and cranes. Two rows of haggard schoolgirls, heads lolling, are led by a nun through the yard. Incongruously, through the sunshine, a snow machine periodically emits suds that melt on your face as you pass: this is Christmas 1984 via Easter weekend 2023. There, amid a clutch of equipment and crew members in the usual onset menagerie, stands Cillian Murphy, producer and star of *Small Things Like These*, in a cinematic return to his native Ireland.

Murphy isn't easy to spot straight away. Your eyes don't immediately land on him as if following an unholy halo of superstar light; he is not presiding over anything or taking up extra room anywhere. That may seem strange, given that many of us have spent years watching his charisma on screen cut swathes through every scene, or gazing into those otherworldly ice-blue eyes that occasionally offer a flash of gangster malevolence.

A highlight reel of Murphy's work is itself prodigious: there are his early days on stage in 90s London in friend and writer Enda Walsh's play-then-film *Disco Pigs*. His speechifying leftist fervour in Ken Loach's *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*. You might recall his transgender glam-rock singer in *Breakfast on Pluto* – but you almost certainly know his cold, feline grace in *Peaky Blinders*. And, of course, there was his sinister Scarecrow in Christopher Nolan's *Batman*. Now his bespectacled visage can be seen in the promotional materials for this summer's enormous new Nolan film: *Oppenheimer*. There, Murphy is playing one of the most recognisable historical minds of the 20th century.

Suffice it to say that the Cork native, 46, has one of the most distinctive faces – and careers – in contemporary film and television. “I remember very clearly, I saw a picture of him in

the newspaper,” Nolan tells me over the phone from Los Angeles. “It was for *28 Days Later*. He had his head shaved, and those extraordinary eyes. I hadn't seen the film. It was just the look of him, it struck me.” Yet in person, that striking screen presence melts into total ordinariness: he is physically slight, unassuming, almost diffident. He sticks out his hand and introduces himself by his first name, like I was going to confuse him with anyone else.

Murphy is currently in between shooting exterior scenes, so he's wearing the costume of his character, Bill Furlong, an 80s coal man with too many mouths to feed. That means a worn-in wax jacket, threadbare work trousers, artificially coal-dusted hands and a genuinely bleeding cut seeping across his knuckles (he caught it while shovelling in a scene). We sit side by side and drink coffee before he rushes off to shoot again, lifting

breezeblocks from a lorry bed in the pretend snow of an Irish winter.

Small Things Like These, adapted for the screen from Claire Keegan's acclaimed and heart-wrenching novella, was handpicked by Murphy: it's his passion project. It's become his first feature production credit on the strength of it being “an important story for Ireland”, he says. It deals with the insidious moral complicity of Irish society in the Magdalene Laundries. “Everyone in Ireland that you talk to, of a certain generation, more or less has a story. It's just *in* Irish people,” says Murphy. “What happened with the church, I think we're still kind of processing it. And art can be a balm for that, it can help with that.”

The production is set in New Ross following on from the book, and here at St. Mary's, which actually operated as a laundry in the past, Murphy points out with an almost

“Everyone in Ireland of a certain generation has a story. *What happened with the church, I think we're still kind of processing it. And art can be a balm for that*”

PREVIOUS SPREAD

CILLIAN WEARS
FULL LOOK BY SAINT
LAURENT

THIS PAGE

CILLIAN WEARS
JACKET BY BERLUTI,
ROLL-NECK BY
ANEST COLLECTIVE,
CORDUROY TROUSERS
BY CARHARTT WIP AT
SELFRIDGES, SHOES
BY GUCCI, SOCKS BY
SOCKSHOP





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“Joanne Woodward said acting is like sex: you should do it and not talk about it. With a good director, you rarely talk about work”

play a lead in a Chris Nolan movie. What actor wouldn't want to do that?”

YOU START TALKING about acting and it's like... when you shine a light on it, it disappears,” Murphy tells me the following day, as we sit in the empty top floor of a swish French restaurant in Dublin Bay. He's looking a bit cleaner than Bill Furlong the coal man today, having just nipped over from his Rolling Stone UK cover shoot across the city. Without yesterday's grime, he looks boyish, almost elfin. “Joanne Woodward said acting is like sex: you should do it and not talk about it,” he says. “And that's why on set, with a good director, you rarely talk about the actual work. You talk around it, what you're going to do next. I can do an immense amount of preparation, but then a lot of the action happens to you in real time. So, there is no value, really, in intellectualising anything.”

Murphy has a quicksilver intellect nonetheless, and we hop from masculinity to 70s Dustin Hoffman films to religion with ease. “My family wasn't particularly religious, but I was taught by a religious order. The Irish school system was almost exclusively controlled by the Catholic Church, and still is to a large degree. And I went to church and got, you know, communion, confirmation and all of that. I have no problem with people having faith,” he says. “But I don't like it being imposed. When it's imposed, it causes harm. That's where I have an issue. So, I don't want to go around bashing the good things about institutionalised religion, because there are some. But when it gets twisted and fucked-up, like it did in our country, and imposed on a nation, that's an issue.”

Given the subjects of his latest projects,

visible shudder that there are “ghosts”. I don't think he's being literal, but he goes on to say, “Being on location does something to the subconscious of the actors. I was very insistent that we didn't build any sets, there's no studio work: it's all location work,” he says. “You can feel the texture, and in the tiny house where we shot you can feel the claustrophobia. The pressure comes in a real way. Chris [Nolan] is also a big fan of that. If you're put in the right environment, you will act differently than to when you walk onset with your fucking soy latte or whatever.”

Murphy's exacting attitude about his own project doesn't seem far removed from the influence of Nolan, his long-time collaborator. They first worked together back in 2005, when Murphy auditioned for what would become Christian Bale's role as Bruce Wayne himself before being cast instead as Dr. Jonathan Crane

— Scarecrow — in *Batman Begins*. Thus began a collaboration that would lead to him playing J Robert Oppenheimer in one of this summer's most highly anticipated films. “I was a Chris Nolan fan. That's how I was when I met him for the first time, because I'd watched *Following*, I'd watched *Memento*, I'd watched *Insomnia*. And I met him for *Batman Begins*, and I met him on the basis of being a fan. So, it feels absurd that I've been in six of his films.”

It seems notable that at the height of his *Peaky* fame, Murphy took time to appear in *Dunkirk* in a cameo as a ‘shivering soldier’ with combat shock, a rather unshowy and minor role for an actor of his calibre. As Murphy points out, “I'd always show up for Chris, even if it was walking in the background of his next movie holding a surfboard. Though... not sure what kind of Chris Nolan movie that would be,” he laughs. “But I always hoped I could


OPPOSITE

CILLIAN WEARS TOP BY
MR. P AT MR PORTER

THIS PAGE

CILLIAN WEARS
FULL LOOK BY SAINT
LAURENT, SHOES BY
GUCCI



A full-page fashion photograph of a man with dark, wavy hair and light-colored eyes. He is wearing a light blue bomber jacket with a ribbed collar, cuffs, and hem, over a black turtleneck sweater. He is also wearing dark corduroy trousers. He stands with his arms crossed against a textured, blue-painted wall that appears to be made of metal or concrete. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the jacket and the wall. In the top right corner, there is a small block of text.

CILLIAN WEARS
JACKET BY BERLUTI,
ROLL-NECK BY
ANEST COLLECTIVE,
CORDUROY TROUSERS
BY CARHARTT WIP AT
SELFRIDGES

which both, in their fashion, tell stories about institutional arrogance and the men who find themselves pitted against it, I ask him about learning lessons from cinema. “Maybe you get people talking when they leave the cinema. I love those films – provocative and political, but with a small p,” he tells me. “If you’re dogmatic and prescriptive, no one wants to watch it, but if it’s in an entertaining, stimulating film, people can watch it on two different levels.”

If it were to be said that Murphy specialises in anything, it might be physically expressing that multi-layered approach: the thoughts and motivations of inward men, who are not prone to garrulousness or fervent displays of emotion. Nolan certainly seems to think so: “Cillian has this extraordinary empathetic ability to carry an audience into a thought process. He projects an intelligence that allows the audience to feel that they understand the character and see layers of meaning.”

Such is the case with his decade-long characterisation of Tommy Shelby, the battle-scarred First World War veteran turned post-war criminal kingpin. So, too, with the very different character he plays in *Small Things Like These*, a monosyllabic working man who is nevertheless constantly lost in a web of thought and memory. From the limited materials so far released to the public in anticipation for *Oppenheimer*, Murphy’s turn as the father of the atomic bomb seems to be an equally interior role. The scientist became a symbol for our collective ambivalence about the bomb and the American deployment of it in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, but as a man, he was artistic and sensitive, a lover of poetry as much as of science, and a strident anti-fascist.

“I think Oppenheimer, of all the characters that I’ve seen Cillian take on and of all the characters that I’ve dealt with in my work, is one of the most complicated and layered people,” says Nolan. “Cillian is one of the few talents able to explore those different layers, and to project that level of complexity in a way that allows you to understand the character.”

Murphy is enthused at the opportunity to bring the story to the screen. “I think it’s the best script I ever read,” he says. The script was, per Nolan, given to the actor written entirely in the first person: the unusual move was immediately queried by Murphy. “He wanted it to be solely from Oppenheimer’s perspective. And I think the film is sensational. As a person who loves films – I’m not saying it ‘cos I’m in the fucking thing, I hate looking at myself – but as a lover of film, as a cinephile, I’m a Chris Nolan fan.”

“Now I am become Death, the destroyer

of worlds,” go the apocryphal words of the scientist upon witnessing his creation detonate for the first time at the Trinity test. We had entered the nuclear age, a threshold we can never conceivably uncross, our capacity for self-annihilation so elegantly and wickedly expressed by Oppenheimer himself. This was a man whose talent, idealism and hubris would lead him to ruin and dubious achievement: in other words, a dream for an actor like Murphy. “His ability to project power applies in a completely different way to a character like Oppenheimer, because Oppenheimer is this extraordinary strategic brain,” says Nolan. “There are all these levels of intention that are going on with the actions he’s taking, and he’s surrounded by people. So, the audience becomes members of this community who are hanging on to his every word, studying his every gesture, to try and understand it.”

Understandably, portraying such an elaborately brilliant mind had its challenges. “In *Sunshine* [Danny Boyle’s 2007 sci-fi movie],

“I don’t want to go around bashing the good things about institutionalised religion, because there are some. But when it gets twisted and fucked-up, like it did in our country, that’s an issue”

I played a physicist. I spent some time with [the physicist] Brian Cox, and he was a brilliant teacher,” Murphy says. “I’m never going to have the intellectual capability – not many of us do – but I loved listening. I enjoyed being around these insanely intelligent men and women and going for dinner to talk about normal shit,” he says. He offers some hints to his characterisation of Oppenheimer as he muses: “With that intellect – which I think can actually be a burden – you’re not seeing stuff in the normal plane that we do. Everything is multifaceted and about to collapse. It’d be a terrible way to buy milk or cut the grass, I’d say.”

Dislocation from the ordinary is hardly unfamiliar for Murphy. Congenitally private, he left London for Dublin about eight years ago with his wife, artist Yvonne McGuinness, and his two teenage sons. “We had 14 years in London. But I feel like as you hit your late 30s and have kids, living in a major metropolis is less exciting. And then also, you know, we’re both Irish. We wanted the kids to be Irish. I

“

*I'm totally **fragile and insecure**, like most actors. It's putting your head over the emotional parapet.*



*It's fuckin' hard. It's a
vulnerable place to be*

”



GILLIAN WEARS SUIT
BY VERDEN, SHIRT
BY DIOR, SHOES BY
JIMMY CHOO, SOCKS
BY FALKE



“The best people are not doing it for any other reason but love of the craft. They have a compulsion to make work, not to be famous”

“A light grilling,” I reply, a bit taken aback by what seem to be genuinely jangling nerves on his part.

Later, he sighs while relating how, “Fame is like commuting. You have to commute to get to your destination.” Don’t get him wrong, he doesn’t like to complain, but it is the work, above all, that he values. “I think that’s the way the best people are: they’re not doing it for any other reason but love of the craft. They have a compulsion to make work, not to be famous or get attention,” he says, by way of praising Irish colleagues like Kerry Condon and Barry Keoghan.

“I don’t really partake. I don’t go out. I’m just at home mostly, or with my friends, unless I have a film to promote. I don’t like being photographed by people. I find that offensive. If I was a woman, and it was a man photographing me...” he trails off. Attempting some levity, I point out there are worse things than women fancying him. “No comment,” Murphy replies firmly. “I think it’s the Tommy Shelby thing. People expect this mysterious, swaggering... it’s just a character. I do feel people are a little bit underwhelmed. That’s fine, it means I’m doing my job. *Peaky* fans are amazing. But sometimes I feel a little sad that I can’t provide – like – that charisma and swagger. He couldn’t be further from me.”

After the season 6 finale aired last summer to hosannas from fans, talk was ignited around a possible *Peaky Blinders* film, with Stephen Knight confirming the plans. Murphy is currently working with the team on putting the movie together. “If there’s more story there, I’d love to do it,” he says. “But it has to be right. Steve Knight wrote 36 hours of television, and we left on such a high. I’m really proud of that last series. So, it would have to feel legitimate and justified to do more,” he says.

think it’s the best decision we made,” he says, pointing out that he sold his kids on it – now nearly 16 and nearly 18 – with the promise of the Labrador they now own.

“They’re really good boys. We have a laugh,” he says, affectionately. “We don’t do ‘Dad’s Movie Night’, but they like some of my films. They say all my films are really *intense*.”

Amid the increasingly frenzied obsession with *Peaky Blinders*, Stephen Knight’s series turned global phenomenon about 20s Birmingham gangsters, Murphy has become something more than an actor with a recognisable face: he’s become a cultural icon synonymous with Tommy Shelby, just as James Gandolfini did with Tony Soprano. It’s an uneasy negotiation for Murphy, who is strident about maintaining his separation from the noise. “It can ruin experiences, because it fetishises everything: you can be walking down the street and

someone takes a picture like this is a fucking event. It kind of destroys nuance and human behaviour, but that’s part and parcel of it,” he says of his reluctant relationship with fame.

“Fame evaporates with regularity,” Murphy ponders, gesturing around the restaurant (a favourite haunt). “I’m around here all the time and no one gives a fucking shit. Nobody cares. I go to the shop. It dissipates. But if... one of the guys from *Succession* walked in here, I’d be all intimidated and shaky. When you’re confronted with someone you’ve invested a lot in, or you think is amazing, the encounter is strange,” he says.

There’s no sense of affectation about Murphy: he really does dislike all of the rigmarole that comes with promoting a project. When I leave him in New Ross the night before our interview, he says to me: “I look forward to my grilling.”

OPPOSITE

CILLIAN WEARS SUIT
BY ERDEM, SHIRT
BY DIOR, SHOES BY
JIMMY CHOO, SOCKS
BY FALKE

THIS PAGE

CILLIAN WEARS TOP BY
MR. PAT MR PORTER





CILLIAN WEARS
FULL LOOK BY SAINT
LAURENT, SHOES BY
GUCCI

HAIR AND MAKEUP BY
GARETH BROMELL AT
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FASHION ASSISTANT
AARON PANDHER

As the evening winds down, Murphy seems visibly more relaxed. He's clearly happier talking about *Inside Llewyn Davis* and Joni Mitchell than himself. Given his interest in music – he tells me that his record collection is his greatest extravagance, and how his teenage band was nearly signed to a major label – I wonder if he'd be game to introduce a musical component into his film work.

"I almost want to protect my relationship with it," he says, reflecting on his love of music. "It was my first love, and I worked really hard at trying to be a musician and it didn't work out," he says, tugging on the sleeves of his jumper. "But I've turned down quite a few biopic roles of musicians," he reveals, although he won't say who. "I'd much prefer to watch a three-hour Scorsese doc about George Harrison than play George Harrison in a bad wig," he says. There's a beat. He smiles. "It wasn't George Harrison I was asked to play, by the way.

"I will never release any music of my own, never, ever," he continues. "I want to do one thing well. And I guess because I'm still a little sore about being a failed musician."

Music is still nipping at Murphy's heels: he admits his go-to when feeling low is *The Beatles Anthology*, along with Peter Jackson's 2021 series *Get Back*. When he puts on his driving playlist during the photoshoot, 70s krautrock blares out (Can's 'Vitamin C', natch.) Later, catching a snap of himself looking unusually jovial in a full-length black leather YSL trench, (photographers never usually ask him to smile, he points out), he says: "I look like Lou Reed just told me I was cool."

When he's relaxed, there's a low-key humour to Murphy, and he swears constantly, a refreshing punctuation for most of his sentences given his often-serious demeanour. It makes for a curious combination: self-deprecating, workaday Irishness ("Don't be silly," he immediately says at the idea he might be intimidating, momentarily forgetting that he has played a *Batman* villain), and also something granite-hewn. ("Be calm and controlled in your life and furious and chaotic in your work. Or something like that," he says, paraphrasing Flaubert.)

"No" is a full sentence with Murphy, as I soon learn. It's the same in his creative projects, according to people who've known him for years: he's unstoppable in pursuit of what he wants, and equally stone-stubborn if he decides against something. "He's always looked to challenge himself. He's never been an actor to rest on his laurels," says Nolan of his leading man. "He's the same guy he was. He hasn't let success change him or get in the

way of the truth of this process in any way. And that's a very difficult thing for an actor to maintain across a career."


Murphy's intractability is also his integrity: it's probably how he has maintained one of the most respected and variable careers in the business, never seeming to settle for the vogueish or vanilla. But he's typically prosaic about it. "I'm totally fragile and insecure, like most actors," he tells me. "It's putting your head over the emotional parapet. It's fuckin' hard. It's a vulnerable place to be."

Back in New Ross, the sun has set and production is ongoing; a few of us have retreated into a tent with a monitor and a headset through which we can see and hear the shooting – and the conversations between Murphy, director Tim Mielants, and co-star Zara Devlin. Technically, this is a simple scene: his character has to enter a coal shed and discover a fragile, freezing teenage girl, put his arms around her, and guide her out. It begins

"It's the Tommy Shelby thing. People expect this mysterious, swaggering... it's a character. But sometimes I feel a little sad that I can't provide that charisma. He couldn't be further from me"

that way, simply a geometry lesson of angles, light and movement. Through the headset, I listen as Murphy suggests re-blocking the scene; chewing ice cubes to make the actors' wintery breath appear; changing the way he enters the frame. Every idea helps. It's a marvel of collaborative filmmaking, brick-by-brick emotional and visual construction as each take noticeably improves. Long-time producer Alan Moloney murmurs with tacit approval that "Cillian interrogates everything."

But it's when Murphy and Devlin begin to improvise, murmuring to one another in low voices, that an electric energy seems to charge through the set. A simple scene becomes a heart-breaking one; a gruff, terse man shows a brief glimpse of soft underbelly, an understated emotional vulnerability all the more powerful for its restraint.

When the filming breaks, Moloney exclaims joyfully. Murphy stands in the car park with his hands in his pockets; suddenly he looks delicate. He's back behind the parapet, where it's safe for a moment. But it's pretty clear he's good and ready for the skirmish. 

The end

Loyle Carner talks to **Rolling Stone UK** about his third album, *hugo*, which sees the 28-year-old rap star deliver his opinion on the urgent issues facing the UK, while reflecting on how fatherhood and maturity signal the start of a new phase in his life

BY ATHIAN AKEC

**PHOTOGRAPHY BY
MICHELLE HELENA JANSSEN**

**CREATIVE AND STYLING BY
JOSEPH KOCHARIAN**

of the beginning





PREVIOUS SPREAD

LOYLE WEARS JACKET
BY DIOR, T-SHIRT
BY PRO CLUB AT
BLACKSMITHS,
TROUSERS BY PALACE
SKATEBOARDS,
WALLABEE BOOTS BY
CLARK'S ORIGINALS,
NECKLACE
(THROUGHOUT)
LOYLE'S OWN

THIS PAGE

LOYLE WEARS DENIM
JACKET AND JEANS
BY CORTEIZ RULES
THE WORLD, T-SHIRT
BY PRO CLUB AT
BLACKSMITHS,
1858 GEOSPHERE O
OXYGEN THE 8000
42MM WATCH BY
MONTBLANC, RING BY
PAWNSHOP, TORHILL
HI BY CLARKS

IN ART, GOLDEN generations are produced in somewhat paradoxical conditions, somewhere in the grey area between opportunity and pressure. The renaissance of British rap is in many ways reflective of these dynamics. The commercial and critical success of the now-dominant genre has coincided with a nation that has experienced wave after wave of economic and social strife.

One of the leading voices in British rap, Loyle Carner returned in October 2022 after a three-year hiatus with his latest album, *hugo*. Now 28, he's been making music since he was 18, going from supporting MF Doom at his first gig to selling out the OVO Arena Wembley weeks before we meet for his Rolling Stone UK cover interview. After the well-received coming-of-age debut album *Yesterday's Gone* in 2017, he propelled himself into the mainstream two years later with the populist-minded second album *Not Waving but Drowning*, which examined the limitations of making a dream reality.

After achieving the fame and affluence afforded by charting albums, sold-out tours and prime festival slots, where do you go next? Album three, *hugo*, primarily produced by Kwes with support from frequent collaborators Alfa Mist and Jordan Rakei, is arguably a more expansive examination of the outside world while also offering a more candid look at Carner's internal dialogue. Its 34-minute run time ties together the personal and the political. He comments on what it's like to mourn youth, the importance of forgiving his father after he became one himself, and even the raw emotion of anger. On the political side, he takes aim at class stratification, materialism and over-policing of Black communities in British society.

MEET CARNER ON a grey April afternoon at his east London house and the conversation is just as kaleidoscopic as his music. The house is neat and somewhat minimalist with books and vinyl adding colour. He's in a serene mood. As we begin the interview, he asks if I've eaten breakfast, and when I reply that I haven't, he orders me a bagel.

We start at the beginning, with his childhood. Benjamin Gerard Coyle-Larner – his stage name is a spoonerism of his surname – was born in London to a white, British mother and a Black,

Guyanese father, who Carner did not have much contact with growing up. Instead, he and his brother were raised by his mother and stepdad in south Croydon.

Throughout life we are constantly in negotiation with our formative memories, trying to wade past blind cynicism or optimism-tinted nostalgia to see true reflections of the experiences that have most powerfully shaped who we are. The roots of who we eventually become are also frequently found in what we experience at school or around our peers. It is a common thread increasingly referenced in music by millennial and Gen Z artists. When speaking about his favourite-ever day at school, Carner talks fondly of Mrs Nelson, head of English and Literacy at the BRIT School, who suddenly passed away in November 2022. Nelson, Carner says, was the first person from his "father's side of the world" to show him that studying English was a genuine option for people from non-white backgrounds. He goes on to describe the day Nelson invited in half of the group Floetry (comprising Marsha Ambrosius and Natalie Stewart) as a real "eureka moment".

As much as Carner describes these experiences as opening up the possibility of creative expression as a viable career path, he also speaks about the difficulty of being neurodiverse. He has ADHD and is also dyslexic. It's therefore no surprise that he found formal education challenging at times. These difficulties coupled with Carner's issues with reading out loud were used by others to make him "feel stupid", he tells me. He also describes in detail parents' evenings as being a cycle of teachers telling his mum: "Your son has real potential, but he's not doing enough with it." The support of his mother, a special education needs teacher, helped Carner navigate this situation, allowing him to "do things that on paper I shouldn't be able to do". More than a decade later, he acknowledges the satisfaction of "being pretty

much one of the only people in my year who gets paid to write".

The rapper describes that he felt like an outsider in a multitude of ways throughout childhood. "Being mixed race, living on the outskirts of London," he says, "but also musically, never really being brought into a 'scene'". Rather than viewing this as a weakness, Carner describes it as a strength of sorts, giving him greater clarity in the societal observations he makes in his lyrics.

Debut albums often represent artists at their hungriest and most relatable. *Yesterday's Gone* is an album that, despite its laid-back, instrumental approach, was born out of necessity. After his stepfather died, Carner needed to provide for his family. On the record, Carner dives into the pressures of young adulthood, missing out on student loans and being resilient enough to see through dreams that don't immediately materialise. Like many albums created at that formative point in an artist's career, it's written from the position of being an underdog, but Carner recites each bar with conviction and confidence.

From the perspective of young people who cling onto the words of rappers, it is the emotionally vulnerable nature of much of Carner's music that makes it resonate. At the Belgium stop of his European tour, a young person in the crowd held up a sign saying: 'Benjamin Coyle-Larner, you saved my life.'

"I do feel a responsibility to just keep making sure that I do right by myself," he says as he thinks about his influence on fans. "And don't let anyone down in terms of like, you know, behaving poorly... especially if they've got my shit tattooed on them." Carner mentions that recently someone showed him their tattoo in tribute to *Yesterday's Gone*. "I just feel responsibility to make sure that person can have that tattoo for the next 80 years, and never have to be like, 'Yeah, it's just the name of the album.'"

"In music you're looking at how you want to push the world forward"

We discuss autoethnography (the idea of a person's individual experiences being used as a tool for examining the wider issues and realities of society) as the basis of much of the best hip-hop and rap. Rap music across the western world has become a tool for commentary for those who are excluded from debates about the nature of their communities. Although it can sometimes be reductionist to brand music as 'political', the various manifestations of this global art form have served as tools of expression and intervention in political issues. In 2015, Kendrick Lamar's single 'Alright' became the soundtrack to a summer of Black Lives Matter protests. Perhaps the lines "my knees gettin' weak, and my gun might blow / But we gon' be alright" encapsulate the emotional low of having to protest against systems of racism that seek to damage a person's mental and physical health, explaining why the song endures as a symbol of defiance.

In recent times, Black British artists who are now in the mainstream have made political interventions about the raising of tuition fees, the neglect after the Grenfell Tower tragedy and its causes, the over-policing of Black British youth, and beyond. Music then becomes a way to document stories, with its ultimate aim being to change the reality they are rooted in. The idea chimes with Carner and his creative process.

In an interview with *NME* published shortly after his debut album received a Mercury Prize nomination, Carner, in response to a question about whether the political turbulence of 2017 would push more young people into creating music as a form of resistance, stated, "If you try to crush something into nothingness, that's when flowers grow out of concrete." His 2020 single, 'Yesterday', and its accompanying music video, is the first indication of his art taking a more explicitly political tone. *hugo* sees this developed further.

"What you're doing in music is looking at how you want to push the world in some way forward," he says. "You want to offer some sort of support or solace to people. But you can only do that for your own experience. I can't tell other people how to live their lives. I can just say, 'This is what I'm seeing. And you've probably seen something similar, this is how it affected me,' and this is what I'm hoping to do going forward."

It's hard to imagine given the success of his first two albums, but Carner frames *hugo* as being the first time he's really "tried hard" at something he's produced, tracing this reluctance to fully apply himself back to his education. "Because at times when I was at school, and I tried hard, and it didn't go well, and you don't get any love," he explains. "It was always just like, 'This is not good enough,' you know? And so, I think that you're always



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LOYLE WEARS DENIM JACKET AND JEANS BY CORTEIZ RULES THE WORLD, T-SHIRT BY PRO CLUB AT BLACKSMITHS, RING BY PAWNSHOP, TORHILL HI BY CLARKS

OPPOSITE

LOYLE WEARS KNITWEAR BY DIOR, JEANS BY OUR LEGACY AT MYTHERESA, TORHILL HI BY CLARKS, 1858 GEOSPHERE O OXYGEN THE 8000 42MM WATCH BY MONTBLANC

worried about that feeling. You know, of like, 'Ah, I tried, and nothing came of it.'"

Carner goes on to describe the effort laced into his third album as being a "necessary step" in exploring different forms of artistic expression, citing the multi-dimensional output of Donald Glover, who produced the shape-shifting absurdist show *Atlanta* and has written Grammy-nominated albums under the moniker Childish Gambino, as a blueprint. He also speaks about listening to *Hoodies All Summer* by British rapper Kano as an important reference point while writing *hugo*. "Kano is one of the few rap 'OGs' who looks out for and uplifts me," he says, adding how recently Kano sent him a jacket with a note inside that stated: "The silent win is loud."

IT WAS THE life-changing moment of becoming a father that Carner says shaped not only the more serious approach he took to his third album, but also its content. He credits the birth of his son as inspiring him to write more openly about his adolescent experiences in a way that pushes his audience further outside the "comfort zone" than his previous work.

The album also draws on Carner's relationship with his biological father. Every night during his recent UK and European tour, Carner delivered a speech about his father, who he says he was never that close to. Carner tells how he called his father to say he was going to be a dad at the age of 25. His father shocked him by putting the phone down – but he then

**"I feel a
responsibility
to keep making
sure that I do
right by myself"**



LOYLE CARNER

rang back some weeks later to say he wanted to teach Carner to drive. It was during these lessons – in a car called Hugo – that Carner learned more about his father's upbringing in a care home, “with no understanding of what it was to be a father or to love anyone”. It was then that Carner was able to forgive him and in doing so break the cycle of dysfunctional fatherhood. This act, he says, was an important part of giving his son access to his Black heritage. Carner ends his address by saying: “The album wouldn't exist without my dad's car.” After the speech was uploaded to TikTok by a concert goer, it went viral and garnered over a million views.

Elsewhere on *hugo*, Carner leans heavily into the frustrations of being a young Black man in contemporary British society: on ‘Speed of Plight’, he raps about the isolation of existing on the wrong side of the British class stratification. ‘Blood On My Nikes’ sees Carner reflect on being scared of the night bus, while on ‘Hate’ he tackles police brutality.

Confronting one's own mortality is another theme of the album. In his younger days, Carner was not always sure that he'd make it to adulthood. “Now, I'm older. And, by that, I mean I'm 28 and [I've] got a house,” he says. “I talk to [rapper and political commentator] Akala about it sometimes and he says that there's that moment where you walk past someone on the street, and instead of looking at you like you're the problem or the enemy, they're kind of like, ‘We both are saved from this dynamic.’ I mean, you're out of this now. And I think it's easy to feel that relief. But then when you have a child, you remember that the cycle is repeating again, you start to think, ‘OK, what's the landscape like for the next generation?’ It really helped me because without that, it's easy to start to fall out of touch.”

Carner talks about this moment in his career as being important in terms of sharing the things he really wants to say. “For the first 30 years of your life, or like Tupac says at the end of ‘Mortal Man’, that's your window. Before you get beaten down by responsibilities and make compromises or whatever, now you're free to activate,” observes Carner on the idea that young people have a certain moral clarity when examining the world. “And so, I think as I'm coming to the end of the beginning, I get to kind of see a beginning starting again, so it's allowed me to see the world through my son's eyes, and it looks big. Still, you know, I don't feel like I have to compromise. I think that that mentality is so dangerous. So, he stopped me from being complacent. Because the world is nowhere near where I want it to be for my son to grow up in it.”

Acknowledging his gratitude for being in a

LOYLE WEARS PUFFER
JACKET BY ALWAYS DO
WHAT YOU SHOULD DO





**“The world is
nowhere near where
I want it to be for my
son to grow up in it”**



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LOYLE WEARS DENIM JACKET AND JEANS BY CORTEIZ RULES THE WORLD, T-SHIRT BY PRO CLUB AT BLACKSMITHS, 1858 GEOSPHERE O OXYGEN THE 8000 42MM WATCH BY MONTBLANC, RING BY PAWNSHOP

OPPOSITE (LEFT)

LOYLE WEARS PUFFER JACKET BY ALWAYS DO WHAT YOU SHOULD DO, T-SHIRT BY PRO CLUB AT BLACKSMITHS, TROUSERS BY CARHARTT AT MR PORTER

OPPOSITE (RIGHT)

LOYLE WEARS KNITWEAR BY DIOR, JEANS BY OUR LEGACY AT MYTHERESA, TORHILL HI BY CLARKS



“For this album, I was finally putting myself first and putting the art first”


position to carry on doing what he loves, Carner also stresses that it’s taken him a while to learn how to enjoy the process and the special moments. “I haven’t been doing this for a short period of time, I know how hard you work to get here,” he says when we speak about his biggest-ever show at Wembley. “I’ve played big shows before, and it’s all been a whirlwind and I haven’t taken any notice. So, I think I was lucky because I could feel the gravity of the situation and be moved by it, to see how many people were out there. To see the emotion, the collective consciousness.” The tour received critical acclaim from reviewers and approval from fans, with clips of performances widely shared across TikTok feeds and Instagram Stories.

“For this album, you know, I was finally putting myself first, if I’m honest, and putting the art first for myself, and I knew that this music was made with a band. The community on stage that when you feel overburdened, it makes me understand why the Red Hot Chili Peppers or whatever are still together after all these years, because the feeling you have is different,” he says about how his live band worked to elevate each performance. “There’s, like, five different people you could turn around

to and all of them are, like... you know they’ve got your back. It’s tight as well. It becomes a different thing.”

Undoubtedly, one of Carner’s strengths as a musician, artist and communicator is his ability to uncover hopeful elements in difficult subject matter without falling into blind optimism. Throughout our conversation he carves out silver linings. In response to my question about how we remain hopeful about the possibility of improving the world, he talks about “the leaps and bounds that have been made around raising awareness on neurodivergence” and speaks enthusiastically about people doing work right now that is needed to craft a better future. He mentions the rapper Kendrick Lamar, the psychology

author Michael Pollen and the kids who attend his annual ADHD summer cooking school as providing inspiration in different ways.

It begs the question, with the epic failings of the current government, what would Carner’s priorities be if he were prime minister? “I would focus on nurses, teachers, youth workers. Find the space for the next community to thrive,” he says. With an upcoming headline slot at Glastonbury set to further elevate his profile, Carner is here to stay, and to continue expressing himself on the issues important to him while effortlessly subverting expectations. It’s this ability to articulate hope in a way that acknowledges tragedy that affirms why Loyle Carner will be one of the most significant British artists for years to come. 



After diving into the seductive late-night sounds of *What's Your Pleasure?*, Jessie Ware is embracing her Age of Aquarius era with a refreshed outlook on life and through the soul-infused disco of new album *That! Feels Good!*

BY CLIFF JOANNOU
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK CANT
CREATIVE AND STYLING BY JOSEPH
KOCHARIAN

This!
Feels
Good!



EN YEARS AGO, some hours after Jessie Ware had played the John Peel tent for her debut at Glastonbury, she found herself at the festival's infamous late-night South East Corner at what was then Lost Vagueness, now Shangri-La. "I was probably

a bit worse for wear, and it was really late. Skream and Disclosure were playing. I was like, 'Come on, give me the mic, guys.' And Howard (Lawrence, one half of Disclosure) was like, 'Babe, you're not doing it. Absolutely not.' And thank God, they didn't let me," Ware's eyes widen at the prospect of a narrowly avoided career mishap during those more hedonistic days when she wasn't balancing family life with three kids and a number 1 podcast alongside her own flourishing music career.

"We would be like family, and we'd have so much fun together. We'd always find each other at the end of the night," recalls Ware of a time when her and her labelmates were on the cusp of breaking through and winning mainstream success.

A few years earlier, Ware was cutting her teeth as a backing singer for childhood friend Jack Peñate, when the chance to tour the US came along. On the advice of her mum, Ware delayed her plans to start law school: "Go and have fun," her mum instructed. So, she did. It was all "pretty low-budget". "We were staying in motels and sharing rooms," Ware says of what then felt like the least sensible thing she'd ever done. "I felt like it was something that I could tell my kids, that I'd done this mad thing. And then it kind of kept on going. So, what was just about having an experience with my best mate turned into a career."

One of Peñate's bandmates, Tic, introduced Ware to Aaron Jerome, aka SBTRKT, which resulted in them collaborating on 2010's 'Nervous'; then she hooked up with Sampha for 'Valentine', which was released two years later. By the time she was on stage at Glastonbury, Ware was officially a solo recording artist, having debuted her celebrated first album *Devotion*, a sublime record that fused soulful pop with R'n'B, which deservedly earned her a Mercury Music Prize nomination. The delicate melodies of songs like 'Wildest Moments' were a world away from her teenage raving years when she was hitting drum'n'bass clubs.

"I was in a bad place. I was trying to please everybody, and trying to do everything"

"I remember there being this beautiful moment when my first record had come out, and I had been at one of Disclosure's first gigs because my mate had put them on in Brixton," says Ware. "I said to my label PMR, 'I think you should check these boys out.' And they ended up signing them, and then that led to Disclosure remixing 'Running', 'Running' becoming this huge thing for me, then me going on a Disclosure record, and all of us playing around the festivals. Because they'd always be on a bit later, after my sets, I'd be jumping on their set to go do a thing. It was this energy." Meanwhile, Julio Bashmore, who produced 'Running' along with other standout tracks on *Devotion*, would be playing another tent. "I remember it just feeling like we were this big family: me, PMR, Julio Bashmore, Disclosure. It had a real identity. We were having so much fun. It went from kind of underground to us becoming slightly more mainstream, and then absolutely killing it."

From Ibiza to Coachella, their stars were in the ascendant, and not just in the UK and Europe, but globally. "Coachella was a bit mad. I was really exhausted. I'd been going flat out," says Ware. "The day before Coachella, I'd turned my foot and I was really just knackered. So, I went on stage with this kind of walking stick, which was not the way that I intended to go on to Coachella. But I had this huge amount of people in the crowd that it was amazing. And then Disclosure played the same tent. So, I hopped on later. That was beautiful."

If you'd told Ware during one of those more riotous nights that a decade later she would be performing to a crowd of 20,000 screaming Harry Styles fans for five nights in Chicago, she'd likely look at you with a sceptical stare, which would translate as a stern: "Fuck off!" (Bearing in mind, this was way back when Styles was in peak-boyband, One Direction mode, and not the beloved British pop prince he now is.) Her assumed reaction is no slight to Styles. It's simply that Jessie Ware has had a peculiar journey from backing singer, to unsure solo artist before establishing herself as one of the UK's most respected vocalists and unassuming pop stars.

When I meet Ware at Chicago's United Center arena in October 2022, she is riding high off that summer's release of 'Free Yourself', the first single from her fifth album, *That! Feels Good!*, which came out at the end of April this year. A storming call to hit the dance floor with unbridled pride, 'Free Yourself' kicked off Ware's new era by scoring a career high for first-week streams for the singer-songwriter. I join the morning's rehearsals in the cavernous empty arena as Ware works through sound check and goes over the dance routines for what is set to be the biggest show of her career. Across the five nights, she will play to 100,000 people. Being a support artist is tough when diehard fans are really just there for the headline act, but she's also following the likes of Wolf Alice and Wet Leg, who had supported previous legs of the tour. No pressure, then.

When we return for the main show that evening, Ware proves herself to be every bit as worthy of that main stage as Styles. Even the artist's management agree that her performance has been a highlight of Styles' touring support acts, with Ware's club-ready hits and pristine vocals filling an auditorium comprising young teen girls, mums and queer fans. Pink feather boas flutter overhead in an arena awash with glow sticks – it's a stark contrast to Ware, who is dressed in black while displaying her dominatrix persona with full-on whip-cracking moments during album title track 'What's Your Pleasure?'. After each song, the crowd responds with rapturous applause. Everybody is on their feet – even if the younger kids don't know the music, the hooks and melodies have them dancing. On night two, she takes to the stage and holds her own on a duet with Styles on 'Cinema', one of the finest cuts from his *Harry's House* album.

During her Chicago run, Ware takes a detour from the arena and indulges her clubbing roots. I'm at Berlin, a club in Nothalsted, the city's LGBTQ+ district formerly known as Boystown. Around the size of your average London flat, the venue is small but packed to popping with fans who know that tonight Jessie Ware will be performing. When she comes on stage, the crowd erupts in appreciation, showering her in dollar bills – a tradition in the USA – as she works her way through a set that includes single 'What's Your Pleasure?' with *that* whip. "From going and supporting Harry in an arena in front of 20,000 people and then going to this, it felt just as loud as



PREVIOUS SPREAD

JESSIE WEARS DRESS
BY COSTARELLOS AT
MYTHERESA, VINTAGE
CHANEL EARRINGS AT
SUSAN CAPLAN, NOSE
RING (THROUGHOUT)
JESSIE'S OWN

THIS PAGE

JESSIE WEARS
DRESS BY STELLA
MCCARTNEY AT
MYTHERESA, MULTI-
FINGER RING (ABOVE)
BY ARA VARTANIAN,
RING (BELOW) BY
GARRARD, SHOES BY
JIMMY CHOO

A woman with long dark hair and dramatic eye makeup is shown in profile, her hand pressed against a rough stone wall. She wears a white blazer and a thin gold belt. Her accessories include a ring, multiple gold bracelets, and hoop earrings. The background is dark with vibrant neon lights in shades of pink, blue, and green.

JESSIE WEARS BLAZER
BY CHRISTOPHER
KANE, RING BY
BOUCHERON, VINTAGE
CHANEL BRACELETS
FROM SUSAN CAPLAN,
EARRINGS BY SHAUN
LEANE, EARRING WORN
AS HAIR BARRETTE,
VINTAGE GIVENCHY AT
SUSAN CAPLAN

the arena. It was a bit grimy... it was a lot of fun," Ware says with glee.

THE NEXT TIME Jessie and I meet, we're a world away from Berlin club in Chicago at the BBC's esteemed Maida Vale Studios. She's here recording for Radio 2's *Piano Room* sessions, performing 'Free Yourself,' a stripped-back cover of Cher's 'Believe' and the debut live performance of second single 'Pearls', with a full orchestra. Gone is the shiny catsuit from the gay club, here Ware is demurely dressed in black trousers with a gold top. After the recording, she's still clearly buzzing from singing 'Pearls' live for the first time, and particularly pleased to have nailed the high notes that come in during its crescendo. "I was like, 'Fuck, I really hope that I can do it live.' Of course, I sing live, but it's that new thing of... you sing it once in the studio, maybe twice, if you're kind of redoing it. But being able to have that muscle memory, being able to practise it, that's something else," she says as she kicks off her shoes and takes a sip of water.

"That was what was so nice about being on tour with Harry Styles. It came at the end of the touring cycle for *What's Your Pleasure?*, where I felt so comfortable with the songs and the show. When people come to a show, you want them to escape for a bit. And they were not there for me, they were there for Harry Styles, but I wanted to get them a bit more. And they were wonderful. It makes you work hard, and have to check yourself a bit," she says humbly.

The gratitude is genuine. Five years ago, Ware was at a painful crossroads where she almost walked away from music. After the lukewarm reception to third album, *Glasshouse*, losing money on a US tour that followed its release, topped off by a disappointing return to Coachella when her set clashed with that of Cardi B at the height of Cardimania, she felt unsure of her place in the music industry.

Those early years of balancing being a mother for the first time with an unrelenting and demanding career felt insurmountable. "I struggled with that when I had my first daughter, and I wrote about that in the music, and nobody really wanted to hear about it. And that's OK, I accept that. I am still really proud of what I did," she affirms. "There's a song on *Glasshouse*, 'Thinking About You', I almost can't listen to it

"I'm in my Age of Aquarius. I feel the most confident I've ever felt, stepping into making music"

because it's about me working too much, my daughter, and me not being there. I think she was probably about a year [old], and she knows it's about her. It's quite a celebratory chorus. But I just want to cry when I hear it, because I feel so wretched. It's just a different time."

Torn between the desire to be present as a parent and giving her music the time she felt it needed was challenging to say the least. "I was in a bad place. I was trying to please everybody, and trying to do everything," Ware says of the self-reflection that followed. "I think I was not allowing my ideas to be heard loud enough. I think being a parent changed things. I've always been involved in my music, but I think I became a bit more no-nonsense. I managed to find a way that I could work that really suited me, that was really focused. And actually, even though I've got loads more that I'm doing now, with the podcast, doing books or making music, it weirdly feels far more balanced now. I'm just happier, I think."

One saving grace came along in the form of her *Table Manners* podcast in 2017. Hosted with her mother Lennie, it has featured star guests like Dolly Parton, P!nk and Andy Serkis sharing their earliest memories of food and how it brought their friends and family together, and is made all the more enjoyable by Ware's relationship with her inquisitive mum. The series became a massive hit, with over 50 million listens to date.

Following a change of management and a move to a new label, Ware had the reset she needed for her music, too: "I wanted to escape from all of that. I was bored of talking about myself."

The first step was to connect with a new creative crew. Ware was set up by her management on a 'blind date' with new writing partners Danny Parker and Shungudzo Kuyimba in Los Angeles. They hit it off instantly. "We have such a kind of open, beautiful relationship. I found real friendships with those two. I trust them implicitly. I love our conversations. I love the worlds that we create," Ware says of their creative synthesis. "Shun is a master with words and poetry. Our chemistry together, it just works. Shun, Danny and I are like the Holy Trinity when it comes to making my best music. I think we'll work together

for my whole career." Along with producer James Ford, they crafted one of 2020's finest albums, *What's Your Pleasure?*, a seductive journey inspired by late-night clubbing and overnight love affairs. It exudes a sensual, erotic passion that propelled Ware back into music consciousness, hitting top 3 on the album charts.

It was the revival Ware needed to reinvigorate her love of singing and performing. The closing song on the album, 'Remember Where You Are', embraces a more retro, soulful sound. Written in reaction to the negative events of the real world happening at the time, from Trump's election to the Covid pandemic, it found a whole new audience when Barack Obama listed it on his famous end-of-year playlist in December 2020. Quite the result for a track that almost never made the final cut. "I toyed with waiting to put that on the new record, and I didn't because I was like, 'No, I don't need to bank it. It can finish the album.' That's why it was the last song on the record, that's where the story was supposed to continue to the next album," Ware says of the epic closing track that would become a precursor to *That! Feels Good!*.

After the critical and commercial success of *What's Your Pleasure?*, Ware found herself ready to embrace a new identity, diving deeper into the soulful grooves of disco and dance. She listened to the music of Earth, Wind & Fire, Grace Jones, Prince, Donna Summer, Diana Ross, Chaka Khan, Rotary Connection, Teena Marie, The B-52's and Blondie to infuse her new direction. "It was about not repeating *What's Your Pleasure?*, so 'Remember Where You Are' was the starting point of a more live, luscious, groove-led sound, which is a bit of a bugger when you don't have the budget for loads more instruments, live," says Ware of the new record's conception.

The first sessions were done during lockdown with Ware and Ford in his home loft studio in Hackney, where they collaborated with *What's Your Pleasure?* co-writers Kuyimba and Parker via video link. "We'd start the session at four in the afternoon, and they'd be getting up in LA, with a coffee. It shouldn't have worked. It was really awkward. Totally..." she pauses, searching for a word...

"Inorganic?" I offer.

"Totally," Jessie concurs. "It was exactly what I didn't want. But, because I'd done the record with them before, because we had this world we'd created and we felt so comfortable, I could have only done that with them. We'd have this thing where they could hear the music at the same time as us, but we were all a bit delayed, so we couldn't sing over each other because it would just be a fucking catastrophe. So, then we'd all have to silence ourselves, and send voice notes of our ideas. It was incredibly long-winded, rather than

being in the room and being like, ‘Oh, I love that bit. Let’s go there.’”

The first song they created would become the album’s third – and current – single, ‘Begin Again’, which, lyrically and thematically, echoed the physical experience of recording. “There’s that tension in it with the lyric *‘I work all night’*. And maybe it was just because I was fucking tired, but there’s the line in it: *‘Why does all the purest love get filtered through machines?’* It felt like there was this barrier, a frustration. But it had all the elements of what I needed and wanted.”

Ware breathed a sigh of relief when Kuyimba was able to fly over from the USA. ‘Finally, this is going to be perfect,’ she thought. And then Ford got Covid and gave it to Kuyimba. Restrictions meant they were forced to isolate. “We were back on bloody Zoom, but at least there wasn’t the time difference. It really was not the romantic story that I wanted. However, I think it shows the strength of our working relationship together, and also maybe having that longing for these live moments amplified the beauty in it.”

They needn’t have worried – the result is a collection of songs that imbue a kind of ethereal energy that floats effortlessly through the album, each track gloriously distinct from the next, while maintaining an elegant, cohesive quality that concept albums can fall short of. “I’m in my Age of Aquarius,” Jessie beams, embracing the power of the astrological era that promises revelation, truth, an expansion of consciousness and enlightenment to humanity.

“I feel the most confident I’ve ever felt, stepping into making music,” says Ware. “I really want to celebrate the beauty of an album, and what an album can represent. I really appreciate the traction I get off streaming sites, and all of that. It’s amazing, don’t get me wrong. But the romantic in me wanted that person to put this album on their vinyl, and just listen to it. And that’s it. I want to be able to cherish that experience, and savour that.”

They recorded a number of tracks, before distilling it down to a neat collection of 10. Acutely aware of how these songs will also come to life, Ware had one eye on the album, and the other on bringing the music to life at her gigs. “I crave this newfound confidence performing, and I feel like the songs are brought to life in another way, and I adore that. I love theatre, I love performances,” Ware says, energised after a sell-out *What’s Your Pleasure?* tour and supporting Harry Styles.

Thinking about future live shows, she wanted “a kind of cousin, another character one” to ‘Ooh La La’, from the last record, which came in the form of ‘Shake the Bottle’, a song that brims with attitude while recounting a series of affairs through various fictional stories. “It felt

“I’m not religious, but I do believe in something. I believe in serendipity and kismet”

melodramatic, and it felt performative with the chorus,” she says. “Then it was like, ‘Well, let’s just amp this up in the verses, too.’ And maybe in the back of my mind I was thinking *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, maybe I was thinking ‘Lipsync for Your Life’, with these anchors of performance, musical theatre and character.”

That theatricality kicks off the new album with its title track, in which Ware ran through her phone’s contacts to enlist some seriously A-list talent. Listen closely and you’ll hear Róisín Murphy, Jamie Demetriou, Kylie, Aisling Bea and others teasing “*That feels good!*” in various intonations, from flighty and flirty to downright dirty. Even her mum made the cut. “I think probably I’d been listening to the Prince album *Controversy* a lot, or something. I wanted that energy. I was like, ‘Who’s a good sport? Who’s got a good voice?’ Like Barry Mulholland (CEO) at Christopher Kane. He’s got a really good Scottish accent, and he’s fucking great.

“I think it’s confident, I think it’s naughty. In my head, I want an army of pleasure-seekers... and we’re all doing it together,” she says. “I’m kind of obsessed with that feeling of togetherness.”

With the album’s first single, ‘Free Yourself’, Ware fully embraced her emancipation. “It was definitely speaking to myself, but also to that person that maybe in their daily life didn’t feel like they could be the one that’s free on the dance floor,” she says. “I quite like to tie in nods to old songs of mine. So, with the ‘*please*’ in the ‘*please yourself*’ line and in ‘*That! Feels Good!*’, there’s the lyric ‘*pleasure is a right*’, because of *What’s Your Pleasure?* I like to feel like there’s a train of thought, and there’s a journey.” Production came from dance pop genius Stuart Price. “Stuart had worked with Madonna, and so she was in my mind, too. It’s hard to forget when you’re holding the same mic that Madonna recorded *Confessions on a Dance Floor* on to not feel like maybe you are hopefully going to be a bit blessed by something.”

Unrestrained dance-floor abandon continued with second single, ‘Pearls’. “*Let it go, let me dance / And shake it ‘til the pearls get lost / In romance, let’s just dance / And shake it ‘til the pearls fall off*”, she sings. Given the album cover artwork featuring a topless Ware looking over her shoulder while

draped in long strings of pearl necklaces, one could be forgiven for wondering if there was any intended innuendo in the track? The sexually charged tone that undulated through the *What’s Your Pleasure?* album side-lined gratuitous sexual references for a more seductive sensuality that is rare in pop music today: “It wasn’t explicit, I think it’s all through the innuendo,” affirms Ware of that last record. So, are the pearl necklaces on *That! Feels Good!* just pearl necklaces, or...? “Abso-fucking-lutely not,” Ware’s eyes widen as she lets out a huge laugh. “But it can be, if somebody wants it to be. I think we realised after, what it could be. And I was like, ‘I’m not mad at that.’ While I like to always look quite classy and sophisticated, it’s also quite fun to have that little nudge, nudge, wink, wink.”

The real story behind ‘Pearls’ came about when production quartet Ware and Price with Coffee Clarence Jr. and Sarah Hudson were looking at a mother-of-pearl guitar. “We were going, ‘*Shake it ‘til the pearls come off!*’” she clarifies, citing inspo from Evelyn Champagne King. “We wanted people to kind of start shaking their shoulders, and then it’s kind of like, ‘OK, we’re limbering up’. A kind of Teena Marie, gorgeous diva moment. But no, I did not do a song about somebody ejaculating on my chest. Absolutely not. It’s about fucking dancing, and being free,” Ware says admonishingly, her eyes channelling her inner mum and giving me a proper telling-off. Sorry, I had to ask.

We then discuss album track ‘Hello Love’, a sumptuous song that ripples with emotion. “I was listening to quite a lot of Donny Hathaway,” she says. “I like the kind of cinematic moment to that song. I also just think the sentiment is so simple. I’m proud of the songwriting, the beauty of it. I love Sheila from Kokoroko’s brass on it. It’s majestic.” Ware adds how she’d love to see the song released, perhaps as a duet. I suggest that I can instantly hear the smooth tones of Miguel or Steve Lacy alongside Ware’s floating melodies – and here we are actively manifesting this moment to life.

On ‘Beautiful People’ (produced with Kuyimba, Ford and Parker), Ware ups the ante and brings it back to the dance floor: “It’s got this kind of impatient energy. And it’s very much about that experience of being able to open those doors to a club, and the beautiful people are everywhere. That moment of feeling like you’re so part of a community, and that escapism. It’s about taking your life, putting it on hold for a moment, and just



JESSIE WEARS
DRESS BY MAISON
VALENTINO, EARRING
BY SHAUN LEANE,
EARRING WORN AS
HAIR BARRETTE,
VINTAGE GIVENCHY AT
SUSAN CAPLAN



JESSIE WEARS JACKET
BY SIMONE ROCHA,
PEARL EARRINGS BY
SOPHIE BILLE BRAHE

HAIR LIZ TAW AT THE
WALL GROUP

MAKEUP FRANCESCA
BRASSO AT THE WALL
GROUP

FASHION ASSISTANT
AARON PANDHER

LOCATION THANKS
TO THE GLORY, 281
KINGSLAND ROAD,
LONDON, E2 8AS

fucking dancing and enjoying yourself.” Stuart Price returns on production duties to take us later into the night with the next track, ‘Freak Me Now’: “The closest I’m getting to French house, or something like that. I feel like it’s kind of my Mousse T. ‘Horny’ moment. It’s a no-nonsense club song. It’s cheeky,” she says, before adding with a grin, “I say ‘Ootchy, cootchy,’ in it.”

Ware describes ‘Lightning’, the record’s penultimate track, as a palate cleanser. “It’s a slow jam. I’m entitled to have slow jams,” she says. “I kind of have always danced within this R&B world, and I love it. I like that I can be versatile, and it is a bit of a gear change.” Finally, album closer ‘These Lips’ has Ware teasing a lover – “*It’s going to take two hearts, two hours, two more / I’m telling you, these lips can do so much more*” – as her voice glides over Ford’s effortless production. “It’s kind of yearning, and then it just pulls it back to be like, wink. It’s one that wants to carry on, it feels like the story’s not necessarily finished, like maybe you’ve just left that room, that dance floor, but the party’s still going on, so that’s why there’s this fade-out. I wanted the fade-out to go on for fucking ever.”

IT’S WARE’S CLUBBING roots blended with the actual ‘at home’ insight that the *Table Manners* podcast serves with each episode that make her the most unstarry pop star I’ve ever met – in the best sense. When she arrives on set for her Rolling Stone UK cover shoot, she’s in comfy clothes, hair tied up in a bun. Within an hour, she is transformed into a disco diva worthy of the biggest stages in the world. We relocate across the road from the photo studio to The Glory, a queer club/bar in east London’s Haggerston, where she throws herself into every shot, outfit change after outfit change. This is Ware in her raw, unfiltered element: running around barefoot while glammed up to the nines, it’s the perfect juxtaposition that is her refined elegance cut with a London-born-and-bred edge. There’s a cheeky sense of humour to match, and for all her modishness in designer flowing dresses, styled hair and striking makeup, her language is littered with more ‘fucks’ than this reinvigorated Jessie Ware could ever give now that she’s back in control. She more than once says: “Oh, maybe don’t mention that in the interview” when we stray off course into more personal matters.

“I’m gonna really enjoy exploring and experimenting. I’m not going anywhere. I’m in it for the long haul”

There’s a moment, mid-chat, when she starts fiddling with one of the hair extensions that is bothering her. “My hair is coming out,” she declares mid-flow as we talk. “Fuck it, I’m just going to take them all out.” I can’t imagine Mariah or Beyoncé ever being so casual. “Don’t wait for me, go on,” Ware says, as she pulls out hair piece after hair piece.

How much does being a pop star mean to her? “You have no idea the amount of things that I RSVP ‘no’ to because I need to put my kids to bed or I’ve just done two podcasts, or I need a night in watching telly to finish *Succession*, you know what I mean?” she says. “My priority is my family, my work is obviously very, very important. But and that’s why when we went through the diary, I kind of took a breath and I was like, ‘I’m not going to be at many pickups and drop-offs at school’ and I feel really guilty about that. But then also, you only put out a record every few years.”

Away from the slick music and that undeniably emotive voice, this everyday personable nature is what gives Ware that highly sought-after and rarely delivered authentic quality in the music industry: relatability. In February, she was hanging out on the dance floor at Body Movements at London’s Printworks. Earlier this month, she was on holiday with her family, befriending strangers by the pool at the Almyra Hotel in Paphos, Cyprus.

Her parents’ divorce when she was a child was a clear indicator of the kind of adult life that Ware wanted for herself. “It definitely made me decide that I didn’t want to replicate that. I met my childhood sweetheart, and we’ve been together since we were 18,” Ware says of her relationship with Sam, with whom she shares three kids. “I think I’ve always been very mindful of how positive our relationship is without being saccharine at all. Like, of course, it’s not always perfect, but I have a lot of respect for him and with how he supports me.”

Their relationship is almost too picture-perfect even for a Disney film. The pair attended primary school together, although they weren’t close friends, then years later would see each other at drum’n’bass clubs when they were 16. And then


she fell for him aged 17. “I pursued him for about six months to try and get a date. I told him that he couldn’t come to my 18th birthday party, because the guest list was full. My mum would kill me if I had any more people. And then the following year, we went on a date on Streatham High Road and the rest is history.

“He’s calm, he is the coolest person I know. He’s always been the coolest person. It’s quite effortless. And he’s got a way with words where he kind of says something so concisely. Whereas I sound really, like, hysterical or rude or something. He says it so matter-of-factly. He’s wonderful. He’s amazing. I’m not allowed to pull any diva shit with him. Like, I just look like an idiot. Because he’d be like, ‘Hang on, who are you?’”

Last December, Ware decided to embrace her heritage by being Batmitzvahed in her mum’s living room. “I felt like I needed to have a bit more of a connection to my Judaism. I think it was probably a reaction to me growing and becoming more aware of it,” she says. “So, my reaction was, ‘Well, I’ll go be a bit more proud.’ I’m so proud to be Jewish, I love my culture. But I knew nothing. I kind of felt like I was being quite fraudulent.” The process took Ware two years to prepare for, studying at every spare moment, having Hebrew lessons, reading backstage at gigs in Brooklyn.

The goal, says Ware, was never about being religious. Instead, it was more about reclaiming an identity that she hadn’t previously embraced. “I’m not religious, [but] I do believe in something. I believe in serendipity and kismet. For me, it’s not religious, it’s ritualistic, tradition, heritage, culture. I wanted to hopefully be able to do my version of it with my family and my friends, whether they’re Jewish or not. I’ve kind of always been proud of it. But there was definitely a moment where I stopped wearing my star of David.”

While ‘Remember Where You Are’ touched on political and social unease in the world, Ware – who has been a vocal Labour supporter and attended Black Lives Matter protests – is even more despondent about the state of the world today. “If I think too hard, and I think about my kids’ future, then I will probably crawl into bed and despair,” she says. “I guess for me I make music that can escape all that.”

As we wrap our interview, our conversation moves to the future. “I had the idea that the next record is gonna be a really hard dance record. Or maybe it goes further into my Age of Aquarius moment,” Ware muses. “As long as it’s good, I don’t care. I’m gonna just actually really enjoy exploring and experimenting. I’m not going anywhere. I’m in it for the long haul. That’s a really new attitude for me where it feels incredibly freeing to be able to just be like, ‘I don’t need to worry, because I think I’ll be OK.’” 





Going for Gold

After a stunning run of albums as one half of electro-folk chameleons Goldfrapp, ethereally voiced frontwoman Alison Goldfrapp is going it alone – and bringing her prerequisite polish to a fresh, fabulous new era

By JAMIE TABBERER

“W

hy shouldn't pop music be intelligent?” I wonder aloud.

“Quite” replies intelli-pop alchemist Alison Goldfrapp, with a raised eyebrow and a concise, authoritative tone that recalls a schoolteacher you'd trust with your life. “I've always thought the best pop songs are the *best songs*,” she continues. “When they're great, they're *beyond*.”

She'd know. From the robotic beats of 'Strict Machine' to the assertive synths of 'Ooh La La', and the pastoral simplicity of 'A&E' to the fizzy rush of 'Rocket', Goldfrapp's singles discography has raised the bar of 21st-century British pop music. And while Alison and bandmate Will Gregory's sparkling, genre-flipping oeuvre (seven studio LPs including five UK top-10 albums and their worldwide million-selling crowning glory, *Supernature*) famously caters for dance, indie and even classical music-lovers, their most fervent fan base is the Popjustice-lurking genre nerd for whom prestigious pop music is a religion.

So, what is this one of this century's most prolific tastemakers listening to of late? “Tove Lo: 'No One Dies

Shop Boys, Róisín Murphy). “He's amazing, Rich,” Alison reflects. “He's got a great sensibility. And he's so fucking quick! Super-efficient. And I really like the way he applies himself to things. He's committed to music and making music. He puts everything into it. I have huge admiration for that. And he's got a wide knowledge of music and played me some fun things when we were together that I hadn't heard before that were really inspiring. It was great working with him on the arrangements and production. But a very different way of working.”

One person missing, obviously, is Alison's old bandmate Will. “Will's great – he's very supportive of what I'm doing,” Alison explains. “We might well end up doing something together again at some point. He's always done other various little things since the beginning, actually – film projects, his Moog orchestra [The Will Gregory Moog Ensemble], so, it's not new for him – it's new for me.”

“Will and I met through a friend of Adrian Atley of Portishead,” Alison recalls of Goldfrapp's genesis nearly 25 years ago. “His friend heard something I'd been doing with some guys in Bristol, a little tune I'd written. She said, 'You've got to hear this,' and he was like, 'Oh, that's interesting.' So, we got in touch with each other and the first thing we ever wrote together was 'Lovely Head'.”

With its coolly batshit lyrics about the decapitation of a handsome crush (“*Frankenstein would want your mind...*”), 'Lovely Head' was Goldfrapp's debut single and the opener on their Mercury Prize-nominated first album *Felt Mountain*. A folksy-electro swirl of a song that's as

“Lockdown forced me to set up a studio and to do things independently. It gave me new confidence”

from Love', over and over,” Alison replies. “I absolutely love that song. It's so good. Very electronic. It's dancey, it's pop, it's Scandi. It's such a great tune.” Goldfrapp's spiritual ascendancy is right there in Tove's 2022 single, of course... And it's also evident in Alison's long-awaited debut solo album, *The Love Invention*, out this May. “Better late than never!” laughs Alison. “Did I want to do it sooner? I think I probably have. But I felt it wasn't quite the right time.”

Her work with Norwegian electronic music duo Röyksopp, which birthed moodily atmospheric dance tracks last year, helped prompt the new era. “It was part of it,” she recalls. “I did think, 'I'd love to do some things with other people. What have I got to lose? All they can do is say no.'” Staggeringly, some turned her down *indirectly*. “It's quite interesting – I asked a few people who didn't even bother responding at all,” she admits. “I won't say who they are. I was slightly offended by that. You think: 'That's a bit rude.' Now, I always make a point, if someone reaches out to me – it doesn't matter what I think of them – I make the point of answering.”

Among the producers who did lend a hand are James Greenwood aka Ghost Culture (Daniel Avery, Kelly Lee Owens), Toby Scott (The Gossip, Annie) and Richard X (Pet

mysteriously cinematic as any Bond track, it arguably served as a tasting menu of all the genre expansionism to come. But Alison always seemed nonplussed by the public's surprise and preoccupation with Goldfrapp's shifting sound – “Yeah, and?” her facial expression seemed to say – because, for her and Gregory, mastery of music is not a novelty or a circus trick, but a state of being.

Now, on *The Love Invention*, it's Alison's production prowess that dominates. The record is a self-referential swag in the same way that Lana Del Rey sampled her own song 'Venice Bitch' on 2023's 'Taco Truck x VB'. Similarly, Alison's new era is turbocharged by self-reflection; by the summoning at will of a rich, prolific legacy, because, well, it's yours, so why not? 'So Hard So Hot', for example, has the disco squelch of *Supernature*, 'SloFo' the hazy melancholy of *Felt Mountain* and 'NeverStop' the playful, dancey house of *Head First*.

“It's funny, I wouldn't have thought of *Head First*,” says Alison of Goldfrapp's underappreciated 2010 collection of tinny 80s stompers and the band's first LP to be criticised as safe and predictable. She instead likens *The Love Invention*'s “chic” sound to that of *Supernature*, opining: “It's more dance, electronic, pop than anything Goldfrapp





did.” I’m admittedly surprised she welcomes Goldfrapp comparisons at all, rather than finding them reductive, and as such, had steeled myself for the icy dominatrix stare of a ‘Black Cherry’-era music video. Not a bit of it. In 2023, it’s good vibes only, as Alison beams with pride and excitement in her new music and life in general.

“There’s a certain confidence I’ve gained,” the London-born star explains. “Lockdown sort of forced a new independency that I hadn’t really experienced in the same way before. It forced me to set up a studio in my home and to do things independently. And through that, it gave me a new confidence – ‘Oh, I can experiment a bit more.’ ‘Oh, I can reach out to that person and say, do you fancy doing something?’ I felt like it was a time to try out new things.”

Songs such as ‘NeverStop’ and ‘Digging Deeper Now’ explore themes of personal evolution with a bright, invigorating force that’s perfect for a spring playlist. “*Everything has changed / In my head / In my heart / In my veins*,” she sings on the latter. “That lyric came about after lockdown, a feeling of: ‘Yeah, everything’s changed. I’ve changed. Everything around me has changed,’” she explains. “Personally, I feel like I’ve changed. Physically, I feel like I’ve changed. So many things. It felt like a very simple, direct way of explaining it. You sense these

from a lot of old shit. So, there’s lots of love in different ways. Not just with the person I’m with.”

I’m reluctant to linger on Alison’s personal life further, having just watched *Meet Me in the Bathroom*, a music documentary about the early 00s NYC indie scene that explores the misogynistic bias faced by the Yeah Yeah Yeahs’ Karen O back in the day. Alison has similar memories. “I remember this guy saying to me once: ‘You’re 40 now and still wearing miniskirts. Do you think that’s acceptable?’ I laugh because I’m like: ‘What?!’ Who says you have to stop wearing short skirts at 40? The last time I was doing some interviews in France was slightly problematic, too. Often, I was with Will, and they’d ask me about my dress, which is fine, but just talk to Will about the music. And completely ignore me. Which used to really piss me off...”

Ageism has followed Alison throughout her career, given that she first found chart success in – shock horror! – her 30s. (“Kind of late, really.”) Not that it did Blondie’s Debbie Harry any harm. “I’ve always looked to her and thought, ‘Thank God, there’s someone else who did all right later in life!’” she says. “I’ve always felt like a late developer in absolutely everything. And here I am doing a solo album at 57! I still feel like a silly, young idiot. It’s weird as you get older – you feel older, but at the same

“I’ve always felt like a late developer in absolutely everything. And here I am doing a solo album at 57!”

things, don’t you, but you’re not necessarily able to articulate everything that you’re feeling.”

Interestingly, because they’re all so markedly different, we’d posit there’s a Goldfrapp album to explain any feeling – if not anything and everything. (The rain today is very *Tales of Us*, for example; fitting, then, that *The Love Invention* was briefly named *Strange Weather*.) But in its hopeful elation, the solo LP stands in stark contrast to the moody darkness apparent in most Goldfrapp music, right up to 2017’s *Silver Eye*.

The Love Invention is a cohesive record with a singular, dancefloor-ready vibe. “When you start, you have an idea of what it’s going to be like, and quite often that changes,” says Alison of the self-editing involved in creating music. “The process of writing, hearing things... But I was quite focused with what I wanted it to sound like. I was thinking, ‘How far do I want to go with this? Do I want to put strings on it?’ Then I thought, ‘No, I don’t want to do that. It’s OK. I’ve done that. I don’t need to do that.’ I got more confident as I went along: ‘I’m focused. I can dabble with that later.’”

It’s threaded together by Alison’s trademark ethereal vocal and, I venture, a sense of romantic ecstasy. “Yeah, there is someone special in my life, it’s true,” she tells me. “I’m just in a happier place generally. I feel like so much has changed. I feel like I’m much more aware of time and enjoying the now. Trying to separate myself

time you so don’t... it’s so weird. You bounce through life thinking: ‘I don’t know jack shit!’ Then you go: ‘Oh my God – but I look like this!’ It’s feeling one thing but looking like another thing.

“We all feel vulnerable, living in a world where we think, ‘What the fuck is going on?’” she continues. “Our world now feels so unstable most of the time. It’s so scary. But you also feel surer and more confident about yourself as you get older. There’s something really lovely about that. It’s a contradiction all the time, I think. It’s brilliant as well, because you never want to stop looking at the world and going, ‘Oh my God... That’s so amazing.’ Feeling like you’re still finding out stuff you never knew about. It’s this constant evolving.”

It’s cheering to see that Alison, once perceived as so stoic and serious, has not lost touch with the child within. Or her awesome sense of humour, as she proves while descending into giggles recalling a fraught conversation over what to call her solo act.

“Tricky said to me: ‘Are you gonna do your own stuff?’” she remembers. She then impersonates a moody, defensive toddler. “I said: ‘...YEAH!’ He said: ‘What are you gonna call yourself?’ I said: ‘Alison Goldfrapp!’

“He goes: ‘Goldfrapp?! You can’t call yourself that!’ I thought, ‘That’s it... I’m definitely calling myself that!’” ®

THE LOVE INVENTION IS OUT NOW

Living the

During their seven years on the music scene, K-pop phenomenon NCT DREAM have sold albums in their multi-millions. As they tour the world, they reflect on cementing the band's original seven-member line-up and how this has made them look to the future with a new sense of purpose

BY TAYLOR GLASBY

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
SM ENTERTAINMENT

DREAM





NCT DREAM: (from left) Mark, Haechan, Jaemin, Chenle, Renjun, Jisung and Jeno

Alive through

South Korean boy band NCT DREAM (leader and eldest, 23-year-old Canadian-Korean Mark, Chinese-born Renjun and Chenle, and native Koreans Haechan, Jeno, Jaemin and Jisung, the youngest at 21 years old) are all self-confessed night owls, the only thing they want to do after a show, says Chenle with a grin, is “pass out”.

Their tour – *The Dream Show 2: In A Dream* – features a 22-track setlist spanning a seven-year, multi-million-album-selling career: the bubblegum pop of their debut, the harder-edged electronic pop of their late teens, and the glitchy, juddering bass of recent singles are all accompanied by strenuous choreography.

“The show starts at 8pm, we finish around 11.30pm, and we get back to the hotel about 12-ish,” says Mark, who is blond in London but black-haired two days later in Paris, with photos of the change trending on Twitter. “But the adrenaline stays in you, so I’ll stay up on my phone looking at YouTube, and you find yourself at three in the morning, like, ‘Oh, I gotta sleep.’”

They’ll often monitor each night’s show via audience videos and reactions: “One fan posted a part in ‘Déjà Vu’ where we jump together, and we were very synchronised, very on point, and when I see those kinds of contents, I’m satisfied,” says Haechan, whose honeyed, nasal tones have made him one of K-pop’s most distinctive vocalists.

Each member, apart from Jisung, has a personal Instagram account but scroll across other platforms. Do they specifically search for NCT DREAM? “No, no,” Chenle says in English, the corners of his lips twitching. “I’m just using my name.”

NCT DREAM wields a deft, dry humour. They’re sarcastic and teasing, more like siblings than teammates, with many of their interviews unravelling into a lively chaos. After their sold-out OVO Arena Wembley show, the members do an industry meet-and-

greet, instantly putting the room at ease with a few situational one-liners and small talk, cheerfully posing for photos. This gregarious, earthy vibe is a beloved trait of their mostly female, but visibly age-diverse fandom who line up for hours outside the venues, many wearing at least one item in the band’s signature neon green.

In Paris,

excitement ripples through the thousands outside the Zénith arena but, backstage, it’s the usual routine, albeit 30 minutes behind schedule. Touring staff are having dinner at two long trestle tables. NCT DREAM, already wearing pristine stage clothes, finish sound check and eat carefully before being ushered over to couches where we riff on their PVC trousers (not too uncomfortably hot to dance in, according to Chenle) and Mark’s hair (his go-to colours are black, blond or blue). There’s a gentle reminder from their PR that time is ticking away.

This murmured aside is poignant or maybe poetic, for time

THE TIME IS NOW (opposite, clockwise from top left) Jaemin reaches out to fans; Jeno is one of the band’s rappers; Renjun is one of the main vocalists; Mark (in Paris with new black hair) returned in 2020



has fiercely pursued and played with NCT DREAM from the outset. The band's original premise in 2016 featured a graduation system, whereby members would age out at 19, and new members added. Adhering to this, Mark left in late December 2018, a decision unpopular with the fandom who'd grown attached to the original line-up. Jaemin spent 2017-2018 on hiatus to recover from a back injury. Fans readied themselves for Jaemin, Haechan, Renjun and Jeno (all born in 2000) to graduate in 2019, an event that never materialised but which was also never addressed, plunging NCTzens (the fandom name) into confusion over the group's fate. Instead, NCT DREAM would embark on their first major tour, only for it to be cut short in February 2020 due to COVID-19.

"Time did sort of feel like it was coming for us," says Jisung with a small smile.

Blond and softly spoken Jeno laces his fingers and adds: "I'd have to say that our path hasn't been smooth sailing."

If the joyous, boundless energy that infuses much of their output is one side of the NCT DREAM coin, the other is home to their discordant experience with time, which has impressed itself on everything from their career vision to their discography. 'We Go Up', released three months prior to Mark leaving in 2018, features the lyrics: "*Look time flies / We fly, changes and timing / In an instant (We dream) / It becomes different everyday*". 'Déjà Vu' (2020) runs thus: "*Good timing, look here / We're all set, we ready / My team new age*". On 'Rewind', from last year's *Glitch Mode*, they sing "*Let's go back to the time when it started, get up... / Let's be together, be the seven that completes*". And their most recent EP, December's *Candy* contains 'Graduation', a heart-wrenching reflection on their group bond and the system that tried to break it.

"The graduation system was traumatic but we had to endure it and go on"
— Mark



"The graduation system was traumatic but we had to endure it and go on," says Mark. NCTzens petitioned tirelessly for NCT DREAM to be made a fixed unit, and April 2020 brought a fourth EP, *Reload*, but also a win for the fandom: confirmation that the graduation system was to be scrapped, and Mark's imminent return to the line-up. "Coming back in, to be honest, I don't think I was fully relieved [about it]," he admits. "I didn't know how everyone, including the fans, were going to react and I didn't know how I should react. I felt like it might complicate things too much, but it also meant we could do something as 7Dream that we'd always dreamed of. It felt like the destiny of NCT DREAM kinda, y'know, took a turn."

In retrospect, Haechan views the first four years of NCT DREAM's public existence "as

a phase of preparation for our beginning." He scrunches the can of Red Bull he's been drinking. "I don't think of NCT DREAM's debut as our official start. I look further beyond, into all the obstacles and experiences we had that got us to where we're at now. I feel like our unofficial starting date is 'Déjà Vu' because we were seven members again and we could say to fans, 'This is our beginning.'"

Since that release in October 2020, the band's fractured relationship with time has, says Jisung, transformed into something positive, adding, "Now it's something we really look forward to, it makes us excited to see what comes in the future."

A renewed sense of direction underpinned their 2021 debut album, *Hot Sauce*, which Jeno says, "was a moment where all of us thought, 'Let's do all that we can, let's experience more.' I think



it was an opportunity that pushed us to try new challenges.”

Its titular lead single amplified all that NCT DREAM is – bright, bold, humorous, with a constant friction between impish synths and warm melodies – while their sweeter, heartfelt cuts flourished with a sensitive maturation. Doubling down on this approach for 2022’s *Glitch Mode* created a slew of excellent tracks: ‘Fire Alarm’, ‘Teddy Bear’, ‘Better Than Gold’ and, a concert highlight, ‘Saturday Drip’ with its irreverent, time-hopping cultural nods to Julius Caesar, 60s slicked hair, and Jackson Pollock.

“What defines an NCT DREAM song is that it includes an element of brightness, our own stories

or a message to our fans,” says Jaemin, whose wide smile shifts between utterly mischievous and improbably charming.

“Having a good album is what we care about more than having a good song,” adds Mark, who, along with Jaemin, Jeno and Jisung, has contributed lyrics since the band’s inception. “We put 100 per cent into our title tracks but we care a lot about our B-sides, so with those we’re as experimental and diverse as we can be. That freedom is important to us, and it really shows in our music.”

It’s been over a year since *Glitch Mode*, and although touring delivers longed-for contact with fans in Europe, the USA and Asia, NCT DREAM are feeling creatively



SEVEN STARS (opposite) Jisung is considered the best dancer; (this page, above left) Chenle joined NCT DREAM at age 14; (above right) Haechan times the band’s start date as 2020, when they returned as a seven-piece

restless. “We’re always, *always* thinking about the music,” stresses Chenle.

“It’s in the making,” Mark blurts. *An album?* “Something like that,” he smiles, making nearby staff splutter explosively.

In between shows,

NCT DREAM make the most of their travels. Tomorrow is their day off and they’ll take in the Louvre, Arc de Triomphe and Eiffel Tower, and go live to their 11.5 million Instagram followers from a boat ride on the Seine, during which they fake-fight, sing and get a little noisy. “There are moments where I feel I have matured,” says Chenle, “but when it comes to being with

**"An NCT DREAM song
includes an element of
brightness, our own stories,
or a message to our fans."
— Jaemin**



my members, I think we go back to being children.”

Mark laughs. “I feel like I’m 16, I swear to God.” He’s only half-joking. “I don’t want to rush into adulthood. For this occupation, there are a lot of sides to it where it’s beneficial for us to remain young. At least, in spirit.” It’s easy to understand why he feels this way – right now, they’re of an age where they still embody the youthful effervescence NCT DREAM was built upon, but are comfortable making forays into more grown-up content, such as the choreography that accompanies their performance of ‘Quiet Down’.

Perhaps more than that, the members, having charted their way through teenhood, appear to be at a point where they’re very much at ease with themselves, and enjoying it. Jisung, who turned 21 in February, remembers “times when I felt afraid to be standing in front of so many people”, a fear he’s since conquered.

Renjun recognised he needed to figure out “how to love myself. It made it easier to find inner peace and, more importantly, be able to show love to those around me”.

NCT DREAM was and still is, says Jaemin, who found himself in a similar situation to Renjun, a “safe haven. You experience the most when you’re in your teens and it’s more special because I spent it with my members. Even now, if I share any concerns I have with them, I’ll have a solution at hand and feel much more at ease,” he laughs.

The protective, reassuring insularity of NCT DREAM, however, is unlike fame’s cloistering tendencies, and it’s Mark who recently began unpicking the latter’s effect on his perspective of the world and place in it. “I don’t have many friends outside of the music industry that are the same age as me. But when I see them, [I realise] they see the world totally different from the way I do. I feel



like they’re more mature, more [immersed] in society, they know the way the world moves more than me. There have been moments where I felt I needed to catch up, that I was being left behind,” he says.

Mulling it over brought him to an important realisation, particularly as he moves further

REPLAY (opposite) NCT DREAM on stage at OVO Arena Wembley; (this page, from top) the boys salute their English fans; the audience is a sea of neon green, the colour of NCT DREAM

along his chosen path. “There are so many values I hold that they might not even imagine, and it’s wiser for me to value that than the things I don’t have or that I couldn’t have. The experiences I have as an entertainer, I don’t think I would give that away for anything else right now.”

It’s getting late, and through the walls comes the sound of fans filling the arena; they’re chanting and singing, and the members’ eyes slide eagerly towards the nearby stage doors. There’s room for one more question: unencumbered by what once was, the last vestiges shaken loose as you, at last, tour the world as seven, how do the members see NCT DREAM in 2023?

“The one thing that comes to my mind is how precious we are, and how happy that makes me feel,” says Jisung as a sound engineer hits play on the first pre-show record, and the thundering roar of the crowd drowns out everything else. NCT DREAM, amused, rise to their feet and head out into the spotlight. 📸

The rebirth of Ronson

Songwriter, DJ and record producer Mark Ronson has been through a period of renewal. Following divorce, he's now happily remarried and has become a dad for the first time in mid-life. Not only that but he is turning his attentions to a new skill: composing a film score, as he tells Rolling Stone UK

By Rachel Felder

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JACK BRIDGELAND

PROMPTNESS ISN'T A virtue you'd usually expect from a record producer – especially first thing in the morning – but Mark Ronson has an excuse for running late that's undeniably valid, and it has nothing to do with having spent an extra-long night in the studio, or watching a buzzworthy new artist perform in a crowded club until well past midnight. On the warm and sunny morning that he's scheduled for an interview in his downtown Manhattan studio, he's been spending time at home with his baby daughter Ruth, who was born a few months ago.

"I was leaving this morning, but I hadn't got a smile out of her," he explains, settled onto a stool

in the studio's control room, in front of stacks of speakers and a vintage recording console. "I was like, 'I'm late, but I can't leave until I see her smile this morning.' I mean, it's so clichéd, but everything she does is completely enchanting."

Certainly, Ronson's life is in quite a different place than when he wrote his last album, 2019's *Late Night Feelings*. That record – which featured vocals by artists like Miley Cyrus, Camila Cabello and Lykke Li – was inspired by the end of his marriage to his first wife, Joséphine de La Baume, who he divorced in 2018. These days, he's happily remarried to actress Grace Gummer, enjoying the experience of being a new father, and working on a musical project – more of which in a minute – that deliberately affords him a more manageable schedule than he's had in the past.



"I feel like it's sort of exactly where I'm supposed to be," he says. "I'm working on something where even if it's long hours and a lot of work, I can be home by 7 or 8 every night. I'm not on the road; I'm not running around; I'm not at the mercy of some young artist who likes to work from 3pm to 1 in the morning. For the most part, I'm getting to be home and devoted and relishing this really amazing other thing that's going on."

The "something" that's in the works isn't a typical album by Mark Ronson – as hard as it is to use the word typical to describe his music and the ever-revolving mix of different styles, eclectic influences, collaborators and players that has become its trademark. For the past few months, he's been composing and recording his first-ever film score. He's not at liberty to name the film or talk about it in even the slightest detail – which he apologises profusely for – but he seems to be savouring the process of being immersed in a brand-new type of project.

"Film is just so different, because you're just surrendering to the visual and you're trying to create a sort of unspoken emotion within whoever's watching it," he says. "You have to surrender some of that ego and that need to constantly be blowing people away. When you're doing the music for the

film, it's very important, but it's actually not about you. I mean, obviously a great score can make a film or ruin a film, there's no doubt about that. But there's something about it that, no matter what's happening, you're usually not the most important thing going on at that moment."

As with his albums and singles, Ronson's score so far has been inspired by a dizzying array of artists and genres. He says that his influences have included the work of everyone from legends like Angelo Badalamenti and Elmer Bernstein to the score of *The Goonies*. In addition to being, as he puts it, "a movie fanatic", Ronson's love of hip-hop fostered an appreciation for (sometimes obscure) vintage movie soundtracks.

"The scores of 60s and 70s soundtracks were, like, this treasure trove for sampling," he says, especially during the "sort of eerie Wu Tang-ish era in the 90s. All those *Enter the Dragon* and [Ennio] Morricone scores. If you were looking through a record bin and you saw one of those, you'd be like, 'Oh, I bet you that has a good loop on it.'"

The score should be done soon. In the meantime, he's playing a noteworthy one-off gig: a show that will be the finale of this year's Montreux Jazz Festival in Switzerland. The evening, scheduled for 15 July, is presented by the watch brand Audemars Piguet, of which Ronson has been an ambassador since early last year. The gig's lineup is billed as "Mark Ronson and His Favourite Band Ever", and included are some of the musicians who played on Amy Winehouse's *Back to Black* album – people like Dave Guy, Ian Hendrickson-Smith, and Homer Steinweiss – as well as singers who have worked

"Film is just so different, because you're surrendering to the visual and trying to create a sort of unspoken emotion"

with Ronson, like Yebba and Lucky Daye, with some surprises in store, too. Ronson's role, he says, is to be "conductor slash DJ programmer on the night".

"I didn't want to just go to Montreux," he recalls, "so I decided to creep in this concept of going with some of the greatest musicians I've ever recorded with, and also in some ways, celebrate them as the unsung kind of heroes. People in the know, and who read liner notes, certainly know who those guys are. But just this idea of the guys who played on *Back to Black* and 'Uptown Funk', and 'I Need a Dollar' by Aloe Blacc and Charles Bradley – these guys behind all these amazing records that people love, that people might not know on a first-name basis, celebrating all their music on the stage."

Ronson has, of course, been involved with his own long list of undeniably impressive records which has earned him BRIT Awards, Grammys and an Oscar. He's worked with a myriad of successful artists – from Lady Gaga to Adele to Paul McCartney to Queens of the Stone Age, to name just a few. But Amy Winehouse's *Back to Black*, released in 2006, is still, for many people, his career-defining moment so far. Why does he think that album has had such a strong and long-lasting impact? "She was so incredible – her character and personality and what she represented. All of it is wrapped up in it," says Ronson. "It's hard to disentangle any of it, why she will always continue to mean something to people, but I'm just obviously proud of any part that I had in it."

Like Winehouse, Ronson has performed at many summer music festivals over the years, including Glastonbury, Pukkelpop and Bestival. "I



MIXING IT UP Grateful for a schedule that allows him time with his new baby, Ronson is relishing two new career challenges: writing a film score and a memoir/part record of club life in 90s New York, where he grew up





love those festivals, especially the great ones,” he says, smiling. “I think Europe has so many amazing festivals, and when you’re starting out, you don’t know anything about them. You’re like, ‘Wait, I’m in the middle. What is this place called? We’re in the Netherlands? OK.’ And you go out on stage and you’re like, ‘These people are incredible.’”

The Montreux Jazz Festival, at which he’s performed several times, stands out in particular. “It just has this rap,” he says. “It’s like everybody knows that you’re going in, you’re going to see some brilliant music. You’re going to have your mind expanded a little. You’re going to have some sophistication; you’re going to have some joy; you’re going to have some dancing. I guess the fact that it’s rooted in jazz, rhythm, blues and soul makes it sort of special as well.”

After the score he’s working on is completed, he’ll resume focus on his upcoming album, the follow-up to *Late Night Feelings*. “I was starting the record and this film came along and just ate every piece of bandwidth that I had,” he recalls. He’s also writing an accompanying book about New York City’s vibrant nightlife scene in the 90s. “I’m so immersed in that while I’m writing

it – talking to every old bouncer, every other DJ, every promoter I knew, all the people that came out dancing – I can’t help but think that won’t inform the music as well.”

Essentially, the book will be, in part, a memoir, but it will also document and recount a seminal period in New York City, and music in general. “I’m remembering how unique and special that time was, not for the obvious reason that I was coming of age, but because it was before camera phones and bottle service and banquettes and all these things, and even the smoking ban in the clubs,” he says. “There was just a very magical era.” Although he’s a first-time author, he’s not intimidated by the process. “It’s not that dissimilar to when I’m sitting here [in the studio] writing, or in front of the computer comping a vocal. It’s very meditative, because it’s just only you and the screen, the thoughts or whatever’s going on.”

To write the book, he adds, he goes down to the basement of his New York City home – “a shitty cellar where we live” – to concentrate on the work at hand. “I love regimen,” he says. “I love order. I can, just like anybody in our day and age, get distracted as hell.”


At the age of 47, his lifestyle is much quieter than during his days of clubgoing every night and touring extensively. “I did start with the family a bit later in life,” he says. “I have friends who have kids that are 14 and 15 now, and I can look at them and be like, ‘Wow, you’re kind of empty nesters. We’re the same age and you’re about to have full freedom.’”

Instead, those friends might say, as Ronson puts it, “You just did it the other way – you had all your freedom.”

“I think that that’s absolutely the case,” he admits. “I’ve had every single cocktail party, social engagement and fancy dinner I ever need to go to for the rest of my life. So it’s a good thing, because I don’t have time for any of that now. And I’m sure that will come back. But since Ruth came along, it just means that every time I’m working, it better be the most important thing I can be doing for work, and if I’m going to travel, it better be the most exciting show and something that I know is going to be so special.”

Will fatherhood, a happy marriage, and an overall sense of contentment influence his upcoming record? “A loved-up daddy 90s album,” he suggests with a wide grin. “Who knows?” @





**“I had
to train
massively
— I didn’t
pop out the
womb like
Beyoncé”**

Refreshingly modest about her talent, Brit School alumnus **Lola Young** prefers to call new release *My Mind Wanders and Sometimes Leaves Completely* a project rather than a debut album. But there’s no denying that her soul-searching songs are hitting all the right notes

By Hannah Ewens

OLA YOUNG DIDN'T always have her tremendous belting voice.

Using it, the 22-year-old introduced herself as a distinctly London artist: a mini Adele with the caustic retorts and humour of Lily Allen. Vocally, it's like Young warbles around the note, promising to either hit or miss it, then swallows it whole. That had to be practised. "I had to train massively – I didn't pop out the womb like Beyoncé," she says bluntly, sat at a table in a Camden members' club, big gold hoops in ears and vape in hand.

"Voices naturally, I think, mature and kind of find their own home as you get a bit older," the 2022 Brit Rising Star nominee continues. Young's voice found a second home on TikTok recently when she suddenly became a viral sensation by teasing her songs on the app – like desperate ballad 'What Is It About Me?' and impudent clapback 'Don't Hate Me' – while performing them into a handheld mic in various public locations in London: on the Tube, with unsuspecting British passengers pretending to not hear her; riding a decorated horse around a carousel; strolling along the canal in Camden. The commenters frequently express being slapped around the face with *that voice*.

Young was born in Croydon, grew up in southeast London and still lives there near family. Her dad was a professional bass player and her mum constantly played music around the house. From the age of six, Lola's mum forced Young into piano, guitar and singing lessons that evidently paid off. Her eclectic music taste comes through in her R&B-inflected pop: she naturally gravitated towards older artists like Prince, Joni Mitchell and Leonard Cohen but absorbed the popular music of her age group and millennials, such as Eminem, Avril Lavigne, Frank Ocean and SZA – the latter messaged her not long ago telling her she was a fan. "I could never say what she said to me, in case she read this," Young says, suddenly bashful.

A significant part of her press so far has focused on her journey through the infamous BRIT School – an institution known for artists who could all feasibly be reference points to describe Young's sound: Adele, Amy Winehouse, Jessie J, Kate Nash, Leona Lewis, King Krule. She started in Year 10, knowing she didn't want a Plan B. Music was her future.

"I was very much sceptical because BRIT holds up to be a very prestigious school. It's got a legacy, but I think for me, it was more in the sense of like, I didn't know what was going to come out of it. But I was very excited. There's that natural cliqueness of a school there, but there's also the vibrancy," she says. "What it did for me, it opened my eyes in terms of the social-political realm of the world, because there were guys walking around in dresses and doing their makeup, there was drag. It was massively eye-opening at the time. Now I can look back and go, 'Oh my gosh, like, that's such an incredible thing that school is able to host people to just be themselves.' Not many schools, I believe, around the country are able to give you that freedom of expression."

Not to brag, she says, but nearer the end, she already knew a lot of what she was being taught. She was signed to Island Records at 18 and prior to that had been gigging for a few years. "You don't need to go to the BRIT School to be successful, and even Stuart Ward, who is the head of BRIT, this amazing guy, he always says, 'This is not a grounds to make you successful. This is a place that's going to help you and teach you things that will help you master your craft.'" Young is not a fan of normal schools: "The education system, I think, is very tapped and very stupid. I definitely was more of a visual learner, but also had no idea what visual learning was. And I also didn't really understand what type of learning I was good at. In my personal opinion, I don't think everyone needs to go to school. I think obviously, education is really important, but the education system is flawed."

THREE WEEKS of personal suffering – or "having a mad one" – in LA and Young made her most significant body of work yet. Don't call it an album, though. "It is an album but it's not. The word 'album' has changed. The pressure with the industry and labels and stuff of calling it a debut album is going to be a lot for me in my career," she says quickly. "So I don't necessarily want to call this my debut album, even though it kind of is. I want to ensure that the album I do create is perfect. I'm not someone who wants to release one album either. I want to do tens of thousands of albums." She considers what she's said for a few seconds. "So, this is a project."

The project is called *My Mind Wanders and Sometimes Leaves Completely*. When Young initially wrote songs, it was a process of letting out emotions she otherwise didn't feel able to in daily life. Now she understands that making songs is a job, so she writes in a more structured, intentional way, "not that that's a negative thing". The result is 10 songs that are well-crafted, dreamy interrogations of being in your early 20s, with pop hooks and powerful vocal flourishes. They're all about living out that contradictory, young-adult reality of oozing confidence but being painfully insecure at the same time.

The first and final track bookend the LA-inspired story, Young explains. Expansive, spoken-word-style opener 'Stream of Consciousness' is "basically me going, like, 'Fuck, I'm in such a way. I'm in my head about shit,' she says, and sings the lyrics at the table. "I say, 'I dream in colour /

"I don't necessarily want to call this my debut album, even though it kind of is. I want to ensure that the album I do create is perfect"



**PROVING
GROUND**

Young's songs
explore the
agony and the
ecstasy of early
adulthood

I hate the summer / I act tougher than I really am / I'm a fuckup / I told my mother / I don't love her when she's all that I have. Then the saddest bit that makes me really upset thinking about is *'the child in me has been and gone, isn't that sad?'* For me that speaks about the struggle of growing up and of hating yourself and the struggle of hating other people in response to hating yourself and a bunch of other things that come with those feelings." The final, breezy, peaceful pop song 'Chill Out' is her telling herself to do just that. "The sky is not falling," she says, "And that is completely the opposing message to the first song, so basically it goes full circle where at the end, I'm going to myself, 'You're not going to die, babe'."

Between those you've got songs like infectious, soulful sing-a-long 'Revolve Around You' – "it's a beautiful, heartfelt record about the fact that I'm pissed off that someone has made my life revolve around them" – and a slow-motion ballad about being the Other Girl, 'Annabelle's House'. Piano and brass-accompanied 'What Is It About Me' is a standout track in the emotional vein of Sam Smith's 'Stay with Me' and Adele's 'Someone Like You'. "What is it about me / That makes you question your life?" Young asks repeatedly, and finally adds, "And lets you let me question mine?" Then on 'Don't Hate Me', she regains her composure and sasses her way across a darker, stripped-back beat. "I think I love you but it's hard to be around you," she half-sneers and laughs as she tells the object of her affections that he's the boring one of the pair of them.

"If there's one thing you know about a Lola Young show, it's that I chat shit. It's like farting when you laugh, you can't control it"

'Semantic Satiation' is her favourite song on the record. "It's basically when you say a word over and over again till it loses its meaning," she explains. "I get it with 'slug'. I hate slugs, they make me feel violently ill. I've got a bad slug phobia. And so if I say slug over and over again, it loses meaning, but I think for that song I wanted to do it for 'love'. You have to listen to the song to understand what I'm saying. It's not that on the nose but it's quite pretentious." She revises that statement with a confident toss of her head. "But at the end of the day, I don't really give a fuck. And it came out beautifully, so I'm really, really happy about it."

WE ARE meeting in Camden ahead of her show at a local pub venue. For all her bravado and blunt charm, Young feels a little nervous. She asks a waiter what the food is he's carrying to another customer ("No, just felt like being nice, to be honest," she says when I ask if she's hungry) and begins to fidget in her seat. She's a bit nauseous, she realises.

"I haven't performed in a long time," she offers by way of explanation, then seeing my nicotine spray, she asks, "...does vaping make you feel sick?" No, I say. "I think I've drunk too much water. Sorry." She apologises and goes to get some fresh air on the balcony, where her manager and team are waiting for her.

Later, at the show, she strides through the audience to get to the stage like a ready-made diva. "If there's one thing you know about a Lola Young show, it's that I chat shit," she tells her fans. "It's like farting when you laugh, you can't control it." Through soaring ballads and up-tempo bops, Young holds everyone captive with that voice. When it's time to introduce 'Semantic Satiation', she starts to cry. "When I wrote it, I was having a breakdown," she admits between tears and suddenly gives a flip of her hair, and says, with a completely straight face, "I'm a boss, aren't I." ®

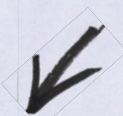
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EMMA CHAM BER LAIN



From YouTube to podcasting, she's made an art of winging it, being herself, and getting everyone to follow her lead

DOESN'T HAVE IT ALL FIGURED OUT

BY ALEX MORRIS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALANA O'HERLIHY



MMA CHAMBERLAIN is about to go off script. Which, to be clear, is *totally* fine with everyone here in this industrial warehouse in downtown Los Angeles on this sunny winter's day. It's fine with Chamberlain's publicist. It's fine with the representatives from Spotify, who are hosting the Stream On event in which Chamberlain is about to make her appearance. It's fine with the woman who will be interviewing her, who gives off strong teleprompter vibes herself but who is apparently game to have Chamberlain just wing it. And it's *more* than fine with Spotify's top brass, who are probably well aware that Chamberlain's *Anything Goes* was the third-most-listened-to podcast on their platform in 2022, and who are therefore primed to believe that, whatever she does, she must be doing something right.

Anyway, who needs scripts? Scripts can be awkward. And inauthentic. And cringe. Scripts are not part of the Emma Chamberlain brand, nor are they particularly beloved by the real Emma Chamberlain, who, in the past six years, has gone from a floundering high-school sophomore to a person with one of the fastest-growing channels on YouTube to a red-carpet icon and podcast sensation and ostensible voice of her generation. And she has done all of this by very specifically – if also somewhat accidentally – not sticking to any particular script. At a time when all those other YouTube influencers were #blessed and living their “best life”, she showed up on the platform zitty and frenetic and irresistibly her awkward

16-year-old self (in one video dissecting Chamberlain's oeuvre, viewers are counselled against taking a shot every time the poster says the word “relatable”; you'd get alcohol poisoning and die). Then, after Chamberlain had racked up millions of subscribers, made millions of dollars, and redefined a genre of new media that was still in the process of defining itself – after her way of editing and of *being* on camera had grown so popular as to become the de facto norm among Gen Z – she pulled back from YouTube and pivoted primarily to podcasts, where she has evolved from a teenager exploring such mysteries as why onions make you cry to a philosophising young woman who can riff for an hour on mortality or creativity or the meaning of life (while still managing to squeeze in references to burps and poops).

Now, she's leaning into the podcast's video format, too, which in her case does not mean glam teams and impeccable lighting. It means setting up a camera in an upstairs room of her house, sinking into the sofa in front of it, tucking a blanket over her pyjama'd legs, and talking from a bullet-point outline while her cats, Declan and Frankie, occasionally wander into the frame. If she gets completely distracted by a bug sighting or the need to scratch under her armpit and narrate why, she just goes with that flow. The flow is sort of the point. The flow is just how she's wired. Content streams from her unbidden, freely, if not exactly for free.

“They gave me a script, but I don't do scripts,” Chamberlain explains now, politely, to one of the many people popping in and out of her makeshift Spotify dressing room, created with curtains within the cavernous space. She has changed from the pyjamas she wore on the ride over – a Beatles sweatshirt and cashmere-y pants – into a white shirt, an orange sweater vest, and a long denim skirt that seems to have an extraneous leg hole because ... Oh, wait! It actually does have an extraneous leg hole. “My stylist was like, ‘Do you want me to tack this down so that it looks more like a skirt?’” she explains. “I was like, ‘No! I like the fact that it is confusing the masses.’” Outside her room, Swedish executives (Spotify is a Swedish company, if you didn't know) lope about, bleary with jet lag as they make the rounds of the various other curtained-off spaces to glad-hand the talent. In the midst of the hubbub, Chamberlain has plopped into a chair across from the clothing rack and is holding forth with the giddiness of a theatre kid backstage on opening night. When someone shares a video of their recent marriage proposal, she practically squeals with delight, then offers to direct the couple's gender-reveal video when they have a kid (“It would end up being really weird, but it would also go to Sundance on accident”). When someone else mentions that she might enjoy attending the Brilliant Minds conference – a sort of genius Burning Man, from the sounds of it – she deems the prospect “epic”. Throughout all this effusion of goodwill, there are multiple check-ins about the script that she very much has not memorised and multiple assurances that, really, she doesn't need to.

“I always get nervous before I do something live,” she admits to the assembled, not seeming nervous at all. “But I think if I memorise things, it does give deepfake sort of energy. I do so much better off the cuff. So I'm going to wing it. We'll see how I do.” She smiles broadly. “We'll see if I pull it off.”

HERE'S ONE THING you need to know about Emma Chamberlain: she is constantly going off script and pulling it off. She is not operating off some master plan. Across platforms, she may have more online followers than there are people on the continent of Australia, but she does not have it all figured out yet, and if you think she might, she will be the very first one to tell you you're wrong. Or not wrong, per se – everyone is entitled to their opinions, as she'd tell you; differing viewpoints are opportunities for growth, as she'd say – but maybe not thinking clearly about how things have gone down for her and how she has navigated it all.

First of all, no one expected Chamberlain to drop out of high school at age 16, which isn't the kind of thing that's typically done in San Bruno, California, the Silicon Valley enclave where she was born in 2001 (four years before YouTube was founded, above a pizzeria some eight miles away). It's also not the kind of thing that's typically done when one is a





PREVIOUS SPREAD:
EMMA WEARS DRESS BY
LOEWE, JEWELLERY BY
CARTIER

THIS PAGE:
EMMA WEARS BODYSUIT
AND SHIRT BY RAF SIMONS,
SHOES BY GIANVITO ROSSI,
STOCKINGS, STYLIST'S OWN

EMMA WEARS OUTFIT BY
BALLY, JEWELLERY BY CARTIER



bubbly blonde, a former competitive cheerleader, and a member of the popular group at school, which Chamberlain says she was, if barely (“It never quite felt like a good fit”). Then again, that feeling of hanging on, of being the scholarship kid at a private girls’ school, of hearing that so-called friends who lived in mansions secretly made fun of the small apartments where she split time between her divorced parents (an artist dad and a flight-coordinator mom), well, that feeling didn’t help. She’d always been an anxious kid. She’d sucked her thumb and rubbed the ear of a stuffy called Biggie Big until she was nine, until right about the time that she’d started watching YouTube every day in the era of *David After Dentist* and *Charlie Bit My Finger* and FRED, a channel following the misadventures of a hyperactive six-year-old played by teenager Lucas Cruikshank (“The first YouTuber I loved,” she says). By the end of her sophomore year, she’d been working so hard to prove herself academically – “It’s like, if you’re smart, it doesn’t even matter how much money you have” – that she’d plunged herself into a deep depression.

You might need to be a member of Gen Z to understand what happened next, but here’s what did: Chamberlain failed her driving test, and the devastation was so total that she skipped out on even going to the last day of her sophomore year. Instead, she persuaded her dad to take her to San Francisco, where they filmed a video called *City Inspired Lookbook*, in which a guileless Chamberlain frolics about in various outfits. “That’s traumatic to watch,” she jokes of her feelings about the video now, but she readily admits that it gave her a sense of purpose then. Over that summer, she tasked herself with putting out one video a day, a breakneck pace that, she says, motivated her to get out of bed, helped her push her depression aside, and made her quickly tire of trying to curate a perfect image online. “I started out by doing that because I didn’t know what else to do,” she’d told me the day before the Spotify event, over sparkling water at the Sunset Tower Hotel. “You have to start by emulating what’s out there – you can’t come out of the gate with a unique idea. But what happened was I got so sick of that. I grew up watching a lot of people that I envied, like, ‘Oh, I envy your bedroom,’ or ‘I envy your makeup collection,’ or I envy this, or I envy that. And I was like, ‘What happens if I go the complete opposite direction? What about somebody who you don’t envy, who you just want to be friends with?’”

It wasn’t even that conscious at first. She’d be doing the influencer thing and would find herself internally mocking what she was doing, and then not so internally mocking it, like when she went on vacation and did the typical oh-my-God-look-at-my-gorgeous-view video, except hers was a view of a sidewalk. Or when she painted her own “Gucci” shirt, a perfect thumb in the eye of influencer-style conspicuous consumption. Famously, her first viral video was *We All Owe the Dollar Store an Apology*, a full-on parody of the high-end fashion-haul vlogs of the time, in which she feigned near-apoplectic delight at *Frozen*-themed Q-tips (“What more could you ask for in a product?”) and a fluffy pen (“Let me just take it out of its packaging so that you can see it in its full glory”) and a scarf covered with pictures of herbs (“I learned more about herbs from this scarf than I ever have in my entire life ... You’re welcome”). The video got half a million views. Chamberlain’s first subscriber had been her dad. By the autumn she had around 300,000 subscribers and was making a lot more than a high-school allowance. If Jenna Marbles was that internet moment’s prankster and Logan Paul its bad boy, Chamberlain had become its quirky and beloved ingenue.

She went back to school in the autumn, but when the administration forbade her from filming on campus, she – and her parents – decided that school was the thing that should go. Barely six months after she posted the original lookbook video, the genre of anti-vlogging she’d stumbled into by just doing her thing was being emulated across YouTube: low production value, high relatability, a dash of the scatological and profane. In the Chamberlain oeuvre, outtakes are elevated, camera angles are unflattering, and she often cuts to video of herself in bed editing the main video with disdain. Rather than showing off some jet-set life, she took viewers along with her to Target or on a drive to get coffee. “I’m making an object that’s so easy to cook that literally cookbooks don’t even have recipes on how

**“THERE WAS
THIS PUBLIC,
UNANIMOUS
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to cook this because it’s that easy,” she says in a video in which she (sort of) makes a burrito, after spending close to a full minute gagging from eating a hot pepper. Her idiosyncratic – though quickly popularised – editing style of rapid zooms and voice distortions and quick-flash text was, she says, just her way of trying to give shape and form to her own reactions. “It was basically replicating how my brain works, the way I was perceiving my footage,” she explains. “So if something would stick out to me, I would zoom in a little bit. I would emphasise. Taking a day that’s mundane and trying to make it interesting – that to me was an art form of my own. It was like, ‘How can I edit this so that people will want to watch me doing boring shit, basically?’” Soon, videos of Chamberlain doing boring shit and just going about her ordinary teenage life were some of YouTube’s most popular.

Which naturally means that the more she showed off that ordinary teenage life, and the more it resonated with people, the less ordinary it became. She moved to Los Angeles by herself at 17, and bought her first house at 18. She attended her first Paris Fashion Week and then was invited by *Vogue* to do red-carpet interviews at the 2021 Met Gala, where her first interview was with Anna Wintour (“There was a microphone issue, and I was like, ‘Fuck!’ I don’t think she was very impressed, but I think I won her back”). She went from repping Hollister to partnerships with Louis Vuitton and Cartier and Lancôme. In 2020, she started her own coffee company, Chamberlain Coffee, whose main marketing point is that it is the brainchild of Emma Chamberlain. At last year’s Met Gala – where her unfiltered response to Jack Harlow telling her “I love you” went viral – she found herself in the toilets with Jenna Ortega, Billie Eilish, Kendall Jenner and Hailey Bieber. Ortega was the only one she didn’t already personally know.

Obviously, backlash to her popularity and her choices has come in waves throughout this time. “What is so special about Emma Chamberlain?” is a not uncommon Google search. Just as she was



**"I ALWAYS
SAY, 'LISTEN,
I DON'T KNOW
WHAT THE FUCK
I'M TALKING
ABOUT'"**

blowing up on YouTube, she says, "There was just this public, unanimous decision that I was now annoying, cringe, all this. And I was getting hated on just for being me. Being hated in your school is one thing; you can go to a different school. Being hated on the internet is the whole fucking world. You can't go anywhere. Talk about an existential crisis when there's nowhere to hide." Sometimes she responded by putting out a video in which she read people's hate comments out loud. Sometimes she just "went into her shell", says her dad, Michael. "It was really rough. It's not like she went off the rails for a long period of time. But there have been many times when I'm like, 'You know what? I don't think this is good. There are not many people that can handle this in a way that leads to a healthy life.'"

There was also the sense that people the world over were watching and waiting for her to fuck up, which she inevitably did. A picture of her pulling back her eyes in the manner of the TikTok fox-eye trend was viewed as insensitive to Asian people. A makeover parody video, in which Chamberlain used foundation several shades too dark, was called out for appearing like blackface. This past March, a Twitter user posted an image of what seemed to be an advertisement for a "Personal Thank You Note From Emma in Instagram DM!" for \$10,000 (or a payment plan of \$902.58 per month), and derision swept the internet. (Her merch team quickly stepped in to say the offering had been mocked up as part of an internal test and that Chamberlain knew nothing about it.) "I've had multiple falling-outs of grace," she says now. "That's really hard for me, because if I intended to do something that was wrong or hurtful, fucking go off, tell me what's up. I'm not a perfect person. Have I fucked up? Hell yes, I've fucked up. But there were a lot of times when things that I did maybe got taken out of context, twisted into [their] own narrative. And you feel out of control of your identity. I'm being generous by saying this shit has fucked with me on a mental level in so many ways."

But honestly, it wasn't just the backlash that

fucked with her, it was also the adulation. As flattered as she was by the mimicry of her video style and content, it meant that suddenly she was doing what a lot of other people were doing – except that she couldn't even do it anymore, not authentically. She wasn't in high school. Her day-to-day existence wasn't relatable, even really to her. And it seemed impossible to process the speed at which her life had completely changed and still keep up with the pace at which she was expected – by the masses if not the algorithm – to keep churning out content about it. Plus, few people had really had this type of celebrity before, a widespread fame forged outside any of the traditional channels and, initially at least, without any of the machinery or apparatus of celebrity to support it – the PR teams, the studios or record labels, the sense of how a career like hers was supposed to go. When the press came calling, she did not have the luxury of a new movie or album or book to talk about and hide behind. There was just... her, lobbing her real thoughts and experiences out into the world on a demanding, regular schedule.

"You're so incredibly accessible to anyone at any given moment," she says of internet stardom. "It's dangerous. And everything is on a global scale, in a way." By 19, the depression that her career had first staved off was being triggered by it. "You start to feel like, 'Oh, fuck, this is getting boring,'" she says of her original anti-vlogger style. "I'm bored of this. Everyone else is getting bored of this." It was hard to figure out how to evolve and to get ahead of her own trend – hard to view her real life as more than just raw material in need of commodification. And while there are any number of ways she could have dealt with that, what she did was maybe one of the last things anyone would have expected from an erstwhile teenage YouTube celebrity: Chamberlain went deep.

IF ONE WERE, in one's mind, to craft a perfect place of quiet contemplation, monastic bliss and midcentury mystique, one could certainly do no better than Chamberlain's home in the Los Angeles hills. Panelled skylights, exposed beams and marble surfaces commingle to soothe the senses. Everywhere one's eyes alight feels clean, curated, organic and Zen. After an *Architectural Digest* video tour was released last year, social media exploded with Tweets like, "Girls don't want boyfriends they want Emma Chamberlain's kitchen."

Her wardrobe is not too shabby either, especially because it's not actually a "wardrobe" but a whole repurposed room in which, a few hours before the Spotify event, Chamberlain can be found sitting on a puffy, striped toadstool of a seat in front of a sleek vanity as one very stylish man blow-dries and fluffs her hair and two very stylish women work on her makeup. Outside the window, light glints off the pool, and a stone waterfall tinkles. Inside, couture hangs with gallery-like precision as Chamberlain explains how she got here – "here" being not this room-size wardrobe, but rather this current place in her mind, which unlike her surroundings, has never been, and will likely never be, a place of respite and calm.

The thing is, she's long since given up on thinking that she can will herself into a place of nirvana via some sort of relationship with millions of people she's never actually met ("When I look at myself as an online object, in a literal way, I fully, immediately, severely dissociate as a response"). She's long since abandoned the idea that money could heal her woes ("It only really matters to a certain point, and that point is much lower than you would expect; beyond that, it brings you nothing"). She's well aware that the body dysmorphia she's struggled with since she was a child will probably always be with her ("Sometimes it's a huge issue, and I'm hyper-obsessed about how I look; having to be photographed can trigger me"). And she's long since abandoned any illusion that fame could pull her out of her own head and deposit her into another one. "I expected to go to the Met Gala or meet somebody I idolised and to reach a new level of happiness that I never felt before," she says at the Sunset Tower bar. "What I found was I felt that same level of happiness as when I won a cheer competition in middle school. I assumed that if I reached the level that I'm at now, I would be sort of invincible and my mind would be expanded,

/** INTERNET'S BEST FRIEND**/



Acquainted

*What
cage?*

*Internet's best
friend*

*Emma
Chamberlain!*

EMMA WEARS TOP, TROUSERS
AND TIE BY KWADAN
EDITIONS, SHOES BY STUART
WEITZMAN



and I'd experience emotions I'd never experienced. I was expecting to feel a feeling that literally doesn't exist. It's like flying to Mars and expecting to find a new colour."

News flash: there are no new colours. There are no new bodies. There are no new heads. There's just her own, in which, she says, "I'm constantly finding myself in an existential crisis, 24/7, all the time." Even now. *Especially* now that the past five years of her life have warp-spun her through the socio-economic spectrum, through the ranks of celebrity, and through such an extensive amount of surreal real-life experience. Especially now that she's given herself permission to slow the fuck down and reflect on all of this, and has turned that reflection into her actual job.

Which means that it behooves her to have questions and not have answers. My sense of a normal day in the life of Emma Chamberlain? She wakes up and thinks. She has coffee and thinks. She works out and thinks. She looks at mood boards and thinks. She drives around and thinks. She makes voice memos and creates bullet points and thinks them through out loud in her upstairs room with a camera rolling. A few days before we first met, she'd done a podcast episode titled *Is Creativity Dead?*. A few days later, she'd released *We Know Nothing*. And if you think whatever ideas she posited in the former might be cancelled out by the latter, that's exactly the sort of thing that she wants you to ponder. The thinking-not-knowing is where her instincts have taken her. The thinking-not-knowing is where she's decided she should psychologically be. "I'm an overthinker," she says. "I don't necessarily fully have a grasp on my identity, but that's part of my identity. I feel comfortable there."

Indeed, few have ever discussed their own mental struggles in such a bright and cheery way as Chamberlain does on *Anything Goes*. Or talked about their body dysmorphia with such self-acceptance. Or given advice with so many caveats. "I always say, 'Listen, I don't know what the fuck I'm talking about.' If you're like, 'Emma, that's not true,' I'm like, 'OK, I know.' I'm the first one to say that I don't know. But I don't feel like I need to necessarily read four books to put my opinion out there," she says, summing up her generation (and part of her appeal to that generation) in 18 words. "Even just coming to three different possible conclusions could make me feel satisfied."

Not that satisfaction comes particularly easily to an overthinker. At the hotel bar, Chamberlain spends a long time talking about her relationship with singer-songwriter Tucker Pillsbury – known professionally as Role Model – and how their happiness, counterintuitively, is also the source of much of her anxiety. "I will say right now, my anxiety has been very bad," she says. "I think it's scary for me at times to rely on people so heavily, whether it's my parents or Tucker. I mean, because of my circumstance, there are so few people in my life who I truly feel I can trust that the fear of anything happening to them is unbearable to me." She tells me that her social circle now consists of exactly six people: her friend Amanda, who she meets for yoga; her stylist Jared Ellner and his boyfriend, Owen, who she meets for shopping; her parents, who are "very nonjudgmental, very open-minded"; and Pillsbury, who "knows all my flaws, all my shortcomings" and still sticks around. After years of fan speculation, Chamberlain and Pillsbury recently took their relationship public, something Chamberlain previously had imagined that she'd never do. "I know it's incredibly vulnerable to say out loud, but Tucker is a complete rock for me," she says. "You know when you're with somebody, and it becomes like you're almost cellularly bonded? I mean, to be honest, I don't feel impulsive saying that I would marry him, because just being around him brings me back to earth. Seeing the way that he carries himself, I'm like, 'All right, I'm fucking losing it, and there's no reason to be losing it.'" Plus, she adds, "We don't enable each other. If I were to show Tucker something I did creatively, and he didn't agree, he would fucking tell me. And he has."

At some point this year, Chamberlain plans to start inviting guests onto the podcast for the first time, people she hopes will disagree with her, too. "I am excited about talking to people who are specialists in topics that I have discussed in the past," she says. "I'm excited to get into the thick of it and have somebody be like, 'No, Emma, you're actually wrong,' because when I'm wrong, it's almost like correcting. It's like putting a puzzle piece

"HOW CAN I EDIT THIS SO THAT PEOPLE WILL WANT TO WATCH ME DOING BORING SHIT"

[REDACTED]

in – but then also knowing that my mind might change again tomorrow."

In the meantime, she concedes, her mind might change about making more YouTube videos. "If I'm in the mood to film some shit, I'm going to do it," she says at one point. "But God knows what that's going to be. It's not going to be like anything I've ever done." Maybe she'll make documentaries. Maybe she'll edit films. Maybe, she says, she'll just retreat, open a coffee shop, settle down, have a few kids, an experience she imagines to be "humbling" and full of wonder and entirely incomprehensible, so of course it's in her lane.

It's getting dark outside the windows of the bar by the time Chamberlain starts indicating that she should probably go. Her dad is in town, and she plans to cook a vegetarian dinner for him. "I have to make him pesto pasta with a side of some sort of vegetable, probably Brussels sprouts," she says. Afterwards, she suspects that Pillsbury will come over for one of the jam sessions he and her dad like to have. "We call it band practice, where I play the drums, Tucker plays acoustic guitar, my dad will play electric," she says of their music, which, she clarifies is "never to be released, only to be done in the privacy of my back room". She laughs. "I'm terrible."

But, you know, sometimes you just need to jam, to go by instinct, to follow what feels right. There's still so much to ponder, so many questions to ask. Still so many unscripted and unscriptable answers, and Chamberlain is here for that. The Spotify appearance the next day won't go entirely as (not) planned – there will be moments when she repeats herself or gets tangled up in her thoughts – but sometimes that's just the way it goes when the answers aren't written. "I didn't nail it," Chamberlain will say, not unhappily, as she exits the stage. "That was one of my worst performances. But it came from a real place."

As long as it comes from a real place, it's fine, really. It really is fine. That's the one thing she knows for sure. ®



HOUSE MUSIC'S CIVIL WAR

DECADES AFTER CHICAGO'S TRAX RECORDS CHANGED DANCE MUSIC FOREVER, FORMER FRIENDS ARE LOCKED IN AN INTENSE BATTLE OVER THE LABEL

BY OLI COLEMAN

IN THE EARLY DAYS of Chicago house music, nobody hustled harder than Vince Lawrence. ► Vince grew up on the South Side of Chicago. As a teenager in the late 70s and early 80s, he was urbane and in the know. He liked Izod shirts, white K-Swiss sneakers and straight-leg jeans; he ran hip parties, loved import records from Europe, and aspired to make music of his own. A lot of what he and his friends were into, he remembers, “came from us reading *GQ* and wishing we were

rich”. ► Around then, there was a specific vibe at Chicago’s high school parties, downtown gay clubs, and on local radio – underground but not exclusive, sophisticated but not so preening that nobody wanted to dance. It was “house” culture, named after a club called the Warehouse. At first, “house music” meant anything that the club’s DJ, Frankie Knuckles, played – disco, Italo disco, Philly soul, New Wave, even punk. Amid that swirl, perfectly on-beat digital rhythms meant DJs could experiment with seamless mixing, and synthesisers were becoming affordable enough to be available outside of studios. The result was a new sound – heavy, stripped-down, synthetic but groove-rich – made by Vince, his friend Jesse Saunders, and other, mostly Black, kids. It was what the world came to know as house music, and for all of its epochal innovation,

ILLUSTRATION BY MARK HARRIS



Vince says it had a simple appeal: "It was the best we could do, and we knew it worked at the parties."

Vince and Jesse couldn't wait to get the new sound onto vinyl, and brought it to Larry Sherman, a thirtysomething son of Chicago who owned a record-pressing plant on the South Side. Soon, Trax Records was born. In the label's early days, Vince was busy beyond just making his own music. In the daytime, he and a small staff ran the presses and put records in sleeves and jackets, and Vince made sales calls and negotiated with distributors, among other things. At night, he went to the club to hand out promo pressings to DJs and see how the dance floor responded to new tracks. Vince says he designed the Trax logo, inspired by the stark, highly legible block-capital typefaces associated with the industrial-music scene. (He also figured that a stark, white-on-black logo would catch the eye of a DJ in a dark club rummaging through vinyl for their next jam.)

Trax captured the Big Bang of a youth movement. It was the first label, in January 1984, to release house and, in the space of two years, put out both the genre-defining 'Move Your Body (The House Music Anthem)', by Marshall Jefferson, and the genre-redefining 'Acid Trax' by Phuture. The latter song gave the world the first real taste of acid house, the subgenre that later crossed the Atlantic and took over youth culture in the UK in a loud, shrill, gorgeous, hormonally haywire kind of way. What Trax helped start has since synthesised into the \$7-billion-a-year EDM business, and Chicago house has recently been growing through the mainstream in major ways: Beyoncé's *Renaissance* and Drake's *Honestly, Nevermind*, both from last year, were homages, with house grooves coursing through their tracks.

But today, the house of Trax is in disarray. Vince and 22 original Trax artists are locked in a legal battle over the rights to their classic music with the current co-owner of the company, Rachael Cain, Vince's one-time friend and Larry's ex-wife. It amounts to a civil war over the catalogue of arguably the most important label in the history of house music.

Vince recently turned 59. A few years ago, his wife, Tara, asked him to start getting his affairs together; life insurance, that kind of thing. They have a nine-year-old son, London, to think about. Vince, who left Trax in 1986, started to pull documentation of his music from a long and varied musical career, to get it all in one place for his family, just in case. But when he began to look at statements that laid out who owned the publishing for songs he had written, he says he was baffled. He found some 30 songs, he says, that had nothing to do with Trax – that, he claims, he recorded for other labels or for himself – had been registered to the label, meaning Trax, in effect, owned the songs and was therefore getting cheques that, Vince says, he should have been getting.



THE TRAX LAWSUIT BEGAN WITH A DISPUTE OVER PUBLISHING RIGHTS. "YOU'LL REMEMBER THE DAY," VINCE TOLD RACHAEL'S LAWYER, "WHEN ALL I WAS ASKING FOR WAS THESE 30 SONGS"

▲
Vince
Lawrence
grew up on
Chicago's
South Side and
helped house
music get off
the ground

Once he grasped the scope of the irregularities, Vince called Rachael, who has owned 50 per cent of Trax since 2006, as a result of her divorce from Larry. (Larry died in 2020; his widow, Sandye Sherman, owns the other half.) "Rachael," Vince remembers telling her, "give [the songs] back. You're making a mistake." Rachael, he says, refused, and Vince says he got a message from Trax saying something to the effect of "We don't have a contract [proving we own the songs], but we're going to assert a claim anyway, until a court says otherwise."

"What you're telling me is you know you have no deal, you know that it's mine, and you're not giving it to me unless I sue you?" Vince recalls

saying. "So I said, 'My son is going to have my [songs], and I don't give a fuck anymore.'" (Rachael denies the exchange happened; "Vince fabricated that scenario," she says.)

Vince says he told Rachael's lawyer, "You're going to remember the day when all I was asking for was these 30 songs."

Almost since the earliest days of the label, Vince says, there has been an ever-growing resentment among classic Trax artists. They say

they have been deprived of what's rightfully theirs by Larry, by Rachael, or by both. And all it took was a little encouragement to bring them into battle.

In October, Vince and his lawyer, Sean Mulroney, filed a suit against Rachael, Trax, Sandye Sherman and the Sherman estate on behalf of the plaintiffs, 22 men and one woman, mostly Black, all of them first-wave Chicago house musicians. The plaintiffs claim they never signed contracts selling all the rights to their work to Larry, but that he – and later Rachael – simply registered the copyright to their work to Trax anyway. They believe Trax either sold copies of that music or licensed it for movies, video games, and so on, and pocketed the money. (Rachael denies that, claiming Trax has had valid contracts for every piece of music it controls, though she admits that some of the physical contracts have been lost along the label's tumultuous and winding path.)

Some of the plaintiffs are the superstars of Trax, like Jefferson, but they also include musicians who doubled as workers in the Trax warehouse back in the day, as well as Maurice Joshua, who launched a career with Trax and went on to win a Grammy for his remix of Beyoncé's 'Crazy in Love'. Several are people Rachael, who has been involved with house music from the beginning, once considered to be close friends.

It turns out that Rachael has her own story to tell, about why she has clung to Trax through ordeal after ordeal, in the face of increasingly bitter opposition. She'll tell you that she's risked everything in order to fend off bigger businesses bent on taking the catalogue, and that all she gets in return is anger and recrimination.

THE COPS SAID it was arson – that Larry Sherman and his pal Richard Randazzo set fire to an old tavern, Smugglers, just off Chicago's Magnificent Mile. Larry, according to Rachael, would claim he was called to a meeting, and the door to Smugglers was booby-trapped, that he tripped something when he opened it.

Either way, on 31 August 1980, there was an explosion that set Smugglers ablaze. A man later identified as Randazzo was seen running from Smugglers. Larry ran away too, bleeding from the head. They both jumped in a car and sped away. Larry got third-degree burns and ended up in the hospital, according to Rachael.

Randazzo was acquitted of arson; Larry was never charged. Larry's brother, Curt – and Larry himself, according to Rachael – believed the explosion was meant to kill Larry. The Mob, probably – some kind of gangsters, anyway.

(Vince lived with Larry for a while, and says Larry sometimes talked about being involved with organised crime. "You know how they say 'Fell off a truck'?" asks Vince. "When they show up with the whole trailer, you think, 'Maybe some of this is true.'")

The point is, Larry was involved in the dark side of Chicago business for much of his life – and when he got into the music industry, it wasn't exactly to become Clive Davis. He and Curt had grown up on Chicago's South Side. Their dad died in 1955, when Larry was six. His mother had to take over the family business, a machine shop that made gears. "She lost that," Curt says, "and after that it was just kind of a struggle to survive... We hustled from the beginning." Curt says Larry got into stealing cars, then robbing rail freight. Curt knew this, not least because he and his brother got into the trucking business together, and Larry used their docks to move the stuff.

When Larry started in the record business in the early 80s, it was a neat little polka hustle. Chicago has one of the world's largest Polish populations outside of Poland, and back then Bel-Aire Records – owned by Eddie Blazonczyk of Eddie Blazonczyk and the Versatones, the man behind 'Polish and Proud of It' and 'Everybody Polka', among others – was, according to Vince, the largest polka label in America. As Vince remembers it, Larry bought the only two vinyl presses in Chicago from a guy whose company had been manufacturing the Bel-Aire catalogue. "So Larry was making these records for Eddie Blazonczyk," Vince says. "Selling shit tons of polka records."

He also bootlegged. Wurlitzer, as Vince remembers, had stopped producing the super-thick 78 rpm singles that fit its jukebox mechanism, so Larry was copying all kinds of music onto these chunky old 78s and selling them to enthusiasts. (Larry was eventually indicted on 51 counts of unlawful use of sound recording, though he pleaded guilty to only a single count. He was sentenced to community service and probation, and had his case disposed of.)

Meanwhile, Vince and Jesse Saunders started making tracks with a drum machine, and when one of their tunes, 'On and On', took off at an underage nightclub called the Playground, and other teen parties, Vince knew from his dad (who owned his own label) where to go to get it pressed up: at Larry Sherman's plant. Once Jesse and Vince showed off their own record at the Playground, every DJ at the parties, clubs, and the house radio station seemed to show up at Larry's warehouse with a tape to pitch.

Largely by virtue of owning the warehouse and being a decade or so older than Vince and Jesse, Larry was by most accounts the de facto head of Trax. He liked to operate in cash; he prided himself on squeezing deals out of the young, unrepresented, mostly Black artists. Rachael says he kept a stack of crisp banknotes on his

desk when he was negotiating – he'd tell an artist that they could have a wad of cash now, or they could take the contract away and have a lawyer read it – but the pile of cash might be gone when they came back. He quickly became notorious for failing to cough up the scant advances and royalties he did promise the acts. Vince says there was only a halfhearted attempt at a system for calculating or paying royalties. Mostly, he says, artists would get a somewhat arbitrary sum of money if Larry wanted to entice them to record more music.

Vince says he never signed any ownership paperwork for the label. He thinks the company was only incorporated when orders became big enough that Larry was reluctantly forced to start using cheques.

In his memoir, *The Diary of a DJ*, Marshall Jefferson remembers a time when Larry for some reason stuck only Jefferson's name on 'Move Your Body' (The House Music Anthem). In fact, the record was made by Jefferson and three buddies: Curtis McClain, Rudy Forbes and Tom Carr, who went down to Trax to confront Larry about it. Larry told them he'd paid Jefferson \$150,000 for the record. (He hadn't, Jefferson says.) Larry's lie caused a whirl of mistrust and recriminations among the friends.

Meanwhile, in the mid-80s, Rachael was busy getting her own music career off the ground. She had grown up on Chicago's North Side, enduring what she describes as a terribly lonely childhood. In 1984, under her stage name 'Screamin' Rachael, she recorded an important track with Jesse and Vince, 'Fantasy', likely the first house track to feature a singer. Jesse called Rachael a "key ingredient" in the track and "a great rock vocalist" in his 2007 memoir, *House Music: The Real Story*.

The way Rachael remembers it, she met Vince and Jesse when they came to see her punk band, 'Screamin' Rachael and Remote. That's not how Vince remembers it. "I told my dad we needed to find a singer and we wanted somebody white, because there was a record called 'Calling All Boys' by the Flirts," he says. "We wanted somebody who sang like that. We saw pictures of Rachael in some punk band, and we were like, 'Oooh, she's good-looking. We can use that to sell records.'"

And after 'Fantasy' came out, the way Rachael remembers it, they were a gang – Rachael, Vince, Jesse and Jefferson. She says she and Vince used to take out Larry's Corvette; she and Jefferson toured together, spent holidays together. As Jesse recalls in his memoir, Rachael gave him an added assist, persuading her pal, the late lawyer Jay B. Ross, to loan Jesse five grand to get Jesse's label, 'Jes Say', off the ground. "Screaming Rachel... was once again an angel to me," Jesse wrote. (Jesse, who is recovering from a stroke and answered questions for this story via email, appears to have changed his outlook since the

book was published, now saying: "All she did was introduce me to Jay B. Ross, who proceeded to steal all my money.")

Jesse, Rachael and Vince all signed big record deals on the coasts in 1986 and left Trax behind. Vince and Jesse both went with Geffen, out of LA; Rachael signed with Arthur Baker's Streetwise Records in New York, and did a deal with Warner Music Group's German label, Teldec.

All three of them crashed. Rachael's labelmates New Edition sued Streetwise out of existence, and Geffen just didn't get Vince's work, he says. Jesse formed Jesse's Gang with Trax artist Duane Buford and singer Twala Jones, and got an album, *Center of Attraction*, onto shelves in 1987. But Geffen didn't pick him up for another record.

Vince's LA experience left him bitter, and soon he withdrew to Larry's warehouse world. Vince started a new label, No L.A. Bull (pronounced "No Label"), in partnership with Larry, who fronted the vinyl and pressed the records. The profits usually came in the form of cash, which Vince and Larry simply split up on the spot. And just like the old days, Vince says, there wasn't a contract between the two.

In 1989, Vince ended up making music for commercials. He was also making house remixes of pop tracks for about \$20,000 each, doing a couple a month and making \$300,000 or \$400,000 a year between the two endeavours. After that, Vince put out records here and there on Trax or No L.A. Bull. Larry would give him \$5,000 or he wouldn't; with the commercials and remix income, it didn't really matter. "So then I played with Larry for fun," he says. "Not for my living."

BY THE EARLY 90s, Larry was living at an address that would one day house perhaps the most notable living Chicagoans of all: the Obamas. The former polka-records guy had moved into 5046 South Greenwood Avenue, the six-bedroom brick Georgian in semi-urban Kenwood that would become the Obamas' place in Chicago during all eight of their years in the White House.

Around 1996, Rachael and Larry ran into each other on the beachfront promenade in Cannes, France. Larry was with the house superstar Joe Smooth, producer of the 1987 gospel-like house pillar 'Promised Land'; all three were in Cannes for MIDEM, a music-industry conference. Larry saw Rachael from a cab and told her to get in.

Larry persuaded Rachael to come back to Chicago. Larry, she recalls, told her she needed a change, and he needed a star artist to record. Rachael said she'd come back, but only if he made her president of Trax – which he did, in lieu of a salary. (He also gave her a small stake in the company, and she also made cash, she says, by cutting international licensing deals for Trax-owned music.) Working for Trax was an exciting

prospect. Rachael remembered the buzz around the factory, everyone pitching in with shrink-wrapping and boxing up records. And she'd learned a lot about the music business in New York, particularly working at Sugar Hill Records, the pioneering hip-hop label that had put out 'Rapper's Delight'.

Larry and Rachael started dating, and Larry moved her into what would one day be known as "the Obama house". Rachael, it turns out, didn't like being out there in Kenwood, so far from downtown, so they soon relocated to the chic address of Lake Point Tower, right on the shore of Lake Michigan.

But the giddy optimism of Rachael's homecoming was soon replaced by something much darker. Not long after moving back to Chicago, she says, Larry hit her for the first time. It was over a vet's bill. Boss, the Trax warehouse cat (so called because she liked to sit in Larry's chair), needed \$1,000 worth of care. They fought over it. "That was when he gave me my first black eye," she says. On another occasion, 4 December 1998, according to his arrest records, Larry "grabbed and jerked her left arm and slapped her" at Lake Point Tower. "[Cain] had to go to the hospital."

Another time, Rachael says, Larry flew into a rage while spending the evening at a movie theatre with Rachael and his daughter from his first marriage, Tessa. He got into his car and sped towards them, narrowly missing them. "Who knows what happened, but he got mad," says Tessa. "Sometimes people just do stuff when they're angry. Like slam on the gas and swerve the car."

That night, Shar, Larry's previous wife and Tessa's mother, showed up and offered Rachael a place to stay. "[Tessa's] mom came to kind of save us," Rachael says. "And I still went away with Larry. I went to stay with Larry instead of going with them, which I probably should have."

The couple married in 1999. It was a difficult relationship to understand, Rachael admits – even, at times, for her. "There were a lot of horrible things about Larry," says Rachael. "But at the beginning, it wasn't horrible like that. He was like a big kid in many ways, at least at first, before he lost his mind totally. He was a big Disney fanatic. He loved *Beauty and the Beast*, going to Disney [parks]."

On 5 March 2003, Rachael swore in a petition for an order of protection from Larry: "My spouse threatened to maim me for life [this morning], grabbed me, threw me across the room. Threw and broke many of my personal items."

"I am in fear for my life," she added. "He is twice my size."

Rachael moved out several times, but kept going back. "I think I had such low self-esteem," she says. "I don't think I ever thought that I wanted that. But I guess you kind of accept it in a way, because maybe you think that you're not worth [something better]."

As Rachael was living through this maelstrom, Trax was foundering. Not long after she got together with Larry, Rachael discovered that the Trax plant was all but deserted. The power had been shut off – Larry was something like \$35,000 behind on the electric bill. Larry told the *Chicago Tribune* that Trax went bankrupt back in 1991, after distributors that owed him \$4.5 million went out of business. (How does one live in a swanky lakefront apartment while being literally unable to keep the lights on at work? "If he had \$10 in his pocket," Curt Sherman says of his brother, "he'd spend \$20.")

Rachael and Larry had to use AuctionWeb – soon to be renamed eBay – to make ends meet. "Larry was totally on the Steiff thing," says a longtime friend of the couple, fashion designer Michael White. Steiff, as in the much-coveted, high-end teddy bears. Larry was selling them on eBay for up to \$2,000, according to White.

In 2002, a Canadian music-publishing company, Casablanca (not to be confused with the US-based disco label), made them an offer. Casablanca would get licenses to the Trax catalogue, which would allow Casablanca to sell Trax music, market it to people making movies, commercials and video games, and make its own sublicensing deals around the world. In return, Casablanca would pay them \$20,000 a month as an advance against revenue from relicensing the tunes (Rachael says that it ended up being \$10,000). It would also loan them \$100,000, using the label as collateral.

It was a terrible deal, but Larry was out of options, and both he and Rachael signed it. Rachael says he forced her to do it.

Larry spent much of the money on state-of-the-art equipment and hiring full-time engineers – which, Rachael protested, they could not afford – for a studio. According to court papers from the time, Casablanca – in addition to the \$100,000 loan – paid Rachael and Larry an advance of \$367,000.

Larry and Rachael defaulted on the loan, according to a legal filing, and when the licenses didn't cover the advance, they had to pay the advances back. And when they couldn't do that, Casablanca collected on the debt. In 2006, the company obtained a court order, and one morning two Cook County sheriff's deputies arrived at Lake Point Tower with some movers and seized computers, master tapes, filing cabinets, recording equipment and anything that belonged to Trax. Casablanca put Trax up for auction, but Casablanca itself was the highest bidder. Larry and Rachael were both left out in the cold, with nothing to do but fight desperately to wrest the label back.



“WHEN [VINCE AND THE OTHER PLAINTIFFS] DIDN’T HELP TO SAVE THIS COMPANY FOR ALL THOSE YEARS,” RACHAEL SAYS, “I RISKED EVERYTHING. I WAS THE ONE WHO FOUGHT”

▲
North Side
native and
current Trax
co-owner
Rachael Cain
at her former
home in Lake
Point Tower

The apartment at Lake Point Tower went into foreclosure – which, in one way at least, was a good thing. It meant that Lawyers for the Creative Arts, a group of volunteer attorneys who represent underfunded people in the arts, agreed to represent Larry and Rachael, and began litigation to get Trax back from Casablanca.

Around the same time, Rachael finally left Larry. On 25 April 2006, Dr Joan M. Anzia, the medical director of the outpatient treatment centre of Northwestern Memorial Hospital,

wrote a letter urging the courts to grant Rachael an immediate divorce. “Ms Cain has been a patient of this clinic since 1996,” she wrote. “The patient has been contending with multiple types of abuse since being married to Larry Sherman. These abuses include: physical, sexual, emotional, financial, and also many instances of coercing Ms Cain to sign legal documents that she did not want to sign. There have been occasions when the patient was handcuffed to a chair and told that if she did not sign documents he would kill her.” (Anzia declined to comment for this story.)

A week after the letter, Rachael and Larry divorced. The former couple were so determined to get Trax back from Casablanca, Rachael says,

that they divided it up in the settlement, even though they didn’t even own it at the time.

In 2007, Casablanca licensed the classic Trax catalogue to Demon Music Group, a company owned by the BBC that deals largely in entire vintage catalogues, often packaging them up as bargain-bin compilations sold in supermarkets. In 2012, Rachael and Larry got back ownership of Trax from Casablanca, but the deal that Casablanca struck with Demon giving it exclusive rights to the catalogue remained in place.

Larry spent the last years of his life at the Paradise Park mobile-home park in Lynwood, Illinois, with Sandye. He often railed against Casablanca and Demon. The last time Vince saw Larry, in the spring of 2018, Larry had a storefront in Lynwood. Looking thin and weakened, he sat amid industrial pallets full of used vinyl. It looked to Vince like he was buying up inventory from closing-down pressing plants – probably to sell on eBay. Vince had gone out there with a Kanye West associate, and he watched Larry cheerfully “clear” a sample of the Trax cut ‘Boom Boom’, which West used on ‘Lift Yourself’. (Vince says that Larry promised him a cut of the payment from West’s team, and then, as if for old times’ sake, didn’t give it to him.) Larry asked about Vince’s son and said he was proud of everything Vince had achieved. Larry died of heart failure in April 2020. Rachael says that she, Tessa and Sandye buried him in a cardboard box, in a plot by a highway, across a chain-link fence from a car dealership. His burial was paid for by a Jewish charity that, among other services, puts up money when the alternative is cremation, which traditionally isn’t permitted for Jews.

After she lost the label to Casablanca, Rachael took a year to, as she puts it, “pull herself together”, then in around 2007 started a new label, Phuture Trax, with her own roster of artists. She kept writing music, performing and DJ’ing. She also married a former rodeo rider turned construction executive. (George Clinton was the best man.)

On 1 January 2022, two years after Larry died, Rachael finally got the use of the rights to the classic Trax catalogue back from Demon. For the first time, she had the chance to run the label exactly as she wanted. But her problems would only multiply.

LAKE POINT TOWER is a significant address. Famous athletes – Scottie Pippen, Sammy Sosa – have all called it home, as has former Obama adviser David Axelrod. When they let you past reception, towards the elevators, you pass a wall covered by a sheet of falling water. The elevators let out onto a large, empty, bright white room the shape of a triangle with the corners rounded off. It feels like an airlock on the *Enterprise* or, perhaps, a forgotten anteroom in Kanye’s mind.

Rachael's address in the building has become a totem of her perceived exploitation of the Trax artists. It's easy to see how. A window looks down, literally, on the city. But when I visited in January, there were no clean Mies van der Rohe lines; there were ancient sofas hidden with throws. You could shut the bathroom door but not all the way – you'd get locked in. The place is ankle-deep in old tapes and dusty Trax paraphernalia; there were also several display cases of Steiff bears, along with the taxidermied remains of Boss, the Trax warehouse cat.

Rachael's current husband, the construction executive, has bankrolled her dogged pursuit of Trax. When the bank threatened to foreclose on the Lake Point apartment in 2007, he bought it from Larry for \$525,000. He's thrown a significant chunk of his own fortune into legal fees and other Trax expenses. He recently sold the apartment, which was on the market for \$515,000.

The various battles – against Casablanca, against Demon, against Larry, and now against Vince and Jesse and 21 others – have ground on the couple's relationship. "He's sick of it," says Rachael. "It's almost destroyed my marriage." (Her husband, who requested that he not be named, declined to comment.) Meanwhile, in November, a promoter for a gig Rachael was due to play took her name off the flyers. Rachael says he told her she's become a pariah in the house world.

"When [Vince and the other plaintiffs] didn't help to save this company for all those years, I risked everything," Rachael says, adding, "What I see is – Vince, you left the label in 1986... Your name is not on one corporation. You weren't the one who fought. I was the one who fought."

Vince says he knew early on that Larry was screwing him and the other artists. He never considered suing. Why? Partly because they couldn't afford a lawsuit back then, but also because "it's Uncle Larry". The Trax kids had a kind of twisted attachment to Larry, according to Vince. Sure, Larry was cheating them, but at least he let them put out their work in the first place – Vince says established Black-owned labels didn't see the potential in the house sound until long after Larry started making the records.

But now, Uncle Larry is out of the picture. "I think it comes down to the fact that [the artists] were loyal to my dad, not to Rachael," says Tessa Sherman. "With his name still on Trax, they didn't have much of a fight against his decisions, and now he's not here to fight on these decisions."

To Jefferson, the Trax situation is consistent with systemic, long-standing problems with the music industry. "Any record deal is skewed in the label's favour to begin with," he says. "I think our time has just come to stick our feet into the ground, brace ourselves, and go for our rights, man. This happens with every artist. I suspect it happened with Little Richard; it happened with the Chess artists, you know, Muddy Waters. And



FOR ALL OF ITS EPOCHAL INNOVATION, VINCE SAYS EARLY HOUSE MUSIC BOILED DOWN TO A SIMPLE TRUTH: "IT WAS THE BEST WE COULD DO, AND WE KNEW IT WORKED AT THE PARTIES"

▲
Vince (second from left) and Jesse Saunders (second from right) in 1984

now it's happening with us. At a certain point, you just fight for your rights."

Vince says the Trax fight is about specific people – regardless of their race – who have mistreated some other specific people. But, he says, the fight also takes place in a context that goes back generations and reaches beyond the music industry and Chicago: "Black people have been dealing with the shit end of the stick forever. You can't get into the club without four IDs. But you don't stop going to the club. Taking the bullshit is an act of resistance."

He thinks he didn't sign papers to protect his share of Trax in the early days because in some, perhaps subconscious, sense he simply never expected a fair deal – so why reach for one? And if he's not careful, he might teach that to London: "I consciously level the playing field so he understands he can do whatever the fuck he wants." Part of that lesson, he says, requires getting the rights to his music back from Trax. ("I feel treatment of artists has nothing to do with skin colour," Rachael responds. "There is not a racist bone in my body, and Larry wasn't racist either.")

In June 2020, two months after Larry's death, Ben Mawson's TaP, the management firm behind Lana Del Rey, bankrolled prominent Trax artists Larry Heard and Robert Owens, who recorded hits including 'Can You Feel It' and 'Washing Machine' (with Heard using the name Mr Fingers), to sue Trax for "not less than \$1 million". Trax settled, and Heard and Owens got their rights back.

Vince Lawrence, Jesse Saunders, Marshall Jefferson and the 20 other plaintiffs filed their case in October 2022. The suit, filed in the Northern

District of Illinois, claims Trax "knowingly submitted materially false information to the Copyright Office by claiming ownership in Plaintiffs' compositions and sound Recordings" – in short, that it claimed it had the rights to the music (and with it the ability to collect royalties) when it didn't. And, the plaintiffs allege, Trax won't be able to produce paperwork to prove it owns the recordings. The plaintiffs are seeking \$150,000 for each master recording they allege Trax fraudulently registered.

The plaintiffs are also asking the court to "invalidate" the copyright registrations that Trax has claimed, in effect returning – or, they would say, recognising – the artists' exclusive ownership of their copyright. The same suit claims that in 2007 Rachael registered the Trax logo with the trademark office even though she knew it belonged to Vince, and that Trax's registration should be cancelled, which would allow Vince to register it.

Trax says either that it has valid contracts or that valid contracts have been lost in its various ordeals, and provided a 1986 contract to Rolling Stone for Jefferson's 'Move Your Body (The House Music Anthem)'. (It promises a \$6,400 advance with a royalty at 15 per cent, among other terms.) Jefferson claims Trax has forged or amended his contracts, including the one for 'Move Your Body'.

"Rachael, I think she's holding onto that catalogue out of spite," Jefferson says. "I don't think anyone ever respected her talent. So this



(Clockwise from above) Screamin' Rachael sang in punk bands and on house tracks like 'Fantasy', cut with Vince and Jesse; Rachael's home in Lake Point Tower became fodder for her detractors; Rachael with Larry. The couple split up Trax in their divorce, despite not owning it at the time

was Rachael's revenge... She really wasn't that talented, we felt. That's how I felt." ("Marshall Jefferson saying that I am hanging on to the catalogue out of spite is petty," Rachael says. "My talent speaks for itself.")

Meanwhile, even Jesse and Vince don't seem to be able to agree on the basics – the suit says the two of them founded it with Larry, but Jesse now says via email that he was more focused on music than the label. "I didn't have a role in Trax," he said.

Richard Darke, who has been representing Rachael since 2005, says that he believes the resentment against her and Trax is based in part on some significant misunderstandings. "I don't know how Larry and Rachael treated all the artists, but I do know that in 2007 and on, it really was not Rachael and Larry's responsibility to pay all these artists," Darke says. "It should have been Casablanca, and then it should have been Casablanca via Demon." Rachael, he claims, wasn't responsible for paying artists until January 2022. ("As much as Casablanca would like to correct impressions about the business dealings of the Trax entities," said Caren A. Lederer, an attorney representing Casablanca, "these companies were parties to years-long litigation that ended in 2012 with a binding settlement agreement that included a non-disparagement provision... Casablanca has and will continue to honour this obligation." Emma Burch, a representative for Demon Music Group, said:

"During the period from 2007 to 31 December 2021, Demon Music Group was a licensee of Casablanca Trax Inc. As a licensee, Demon Music Group was not responsible for artist payments. The contractual responsibility for artist payments sat with the licensor or relevant rights owner.")

On 6 March, Sandye's attorney asked a judge to dismiss the lawsuit, claiming the plaintiffs don't allege what musical works were infringed on, "by whom, or... how and/or when" they were infringed, that certain defendants should not have been named in the first place, and that the allegations are lacking in substance. On 3 April, attorneys for Trax and Rachael joined them in demanding the case be dismissed for the same reason. The court has yet to respond.

Lita Rosario-Richardson, a Washington, D.C.-based lawyer who specialises in music rights, says Trax and Rachael are in a lose-lose spot. If they can't come up with valid contracts to support their copyright registrations, they'll be considered to have filed copyright fraudulently. But if they can come up with the contracts, they'll owe whatever royalties the artists are due per those contracts. She suspects Vince may have more trouble arguing that he owns the logo, since what matters with trademarks is not so much who owns them as who is using them – and Trax, clearly, has been using the mark that he claims is his.

With the plaintiffs seeking \$150,000 per master, a ruling in their favour would almost certainly bankrupt Trax. Rosario-Richardson suggests Rachael's best move may be to settle – much as with Heard and Owens – and hope to simply "return" the rights to the artists without paying damages.

As if all that wasn't complicated enough, the legal situation behind the suits is decidedly messy: Greg Roselli, who represents Sandye, used to be Rachael's attorney, and before Mulroney, Vince's attorney, sued Trax, he represented a buyer in an aborted attempt to purchase the label. Meanwhile, Roselli hopes to set up Trax in the UK, where he's based, and Mulroney has suggested that he himself might be the general counsel for a new, Vince-led Trax, should their suit skittle Rachael out of the way. (Roselli, as Sandye's attorney, says, "As to the future, Sandye Sherman's vision is to reestablish the label by working things out with the Trax legendary artists." Mulroney said, "The artists will decide who they want to work with, and I do hope I will be part of it.") Meanwhile, Rachael and Sandye are suing each other, Rachael is suing one of the lawyers, and there are various disputes over the divorce settlements and will.

Despite Mulroney's suggestion of a new Vince-led Trax, Vince – who owns a studio and already has an organisation, Slang Music Group, that provides music for commercials and films – says that he doesn't want to "take over" the label. "I just want people to have what belongs to them," he says.

Rachael – who has only had full control over the classic catalogue since 1 January 2022, when she got the use of it back from Demon – says that part of the terms of the return of the rights was a fund of approximately \$100,000 to be divided among the artists. She also says that 50 per cent of the income from those tracks since January 2022 has been put in escrow to be distributed among the artists, and has sent out letters to classic Trax artists asking for tax documents that would allow them to be paid. She says Trax has also engaged royalties-accounting firm Infinite Catalog to manage the distribution of payments.

The theory among some in the Trax camp is that when Demon handed the catalogue back to Rachael last year, it didn't do so out of generosity. Demon knew, the theory goes, that litigation might be coming and, perhaps, that the perception that the venerable BBC, Demon's parent company, was stiffing artists would be scandalous. (Demon responds: "This is factually inaccurate. Demon Music Group, as licensee, not rights owner, provided all relevant royalty statements directly to its licensor, Casablanca Trax Inc., and the rights owner was responsible for making artist payments.")

Rachael is heartbroken, but she's not letting go. "When I started the journey, no one, absolutely no one, believed I could ever win against Casablanca... I am the only person who just believed in persevering, and somehow all that finally ended only to start this new terrible chapter," she says.

"There were so many times in my life where I'd be losing everything. Losing people I love; losing everything I have. And now it's happening again." 🗿



THE MISSIONARY
Eubank leading his
Free Burma Rangers
in December



RS + 123

For 25 years, ex-Special Forces officer Dave Eubank has been dodging bullets to bring humanitarian aid to rebels in Burma's ongoing civil war. Critics say he blurs the line between combat and relief work while proselytising the Gospel. Rolling Stone spent three weeks in the jungle with him to try to learn the truth

BY JASON MOTLAGH



MINISTER OF WAR

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AVE EUBANK makes an exploding gesture with his fist to alert the guerrilla soldiers following him of the danger ahead. “From here until we pass the road, the trail is lined with mines,” he says, scanning the mountainous Burmese jungle for signs of trouble. “Watch where you step.” As his signal relays down the line, conversations fall silent and the air hums with only the sound of heavy breathing and hundreds of footsteps on hard-packed ground.

Eubank picks up the pace, slashing through brush and thorny stalks that tear at his clothing. A former US Special Forces officer and ordained Christian minister, he started the Free Burma Rangers (FBR) in the late 90s to provide medical care and aid to people resisting the Southeast Asian nation’s military junta, a brutal dictatorship that has crushed dissent and oppressed ethnic minorities for seven decades in what is the world’s longest-running civil war. With a few volunteers and his own wife and kids in tow, Eubank set FBR apart with a relentless commitment to go places other humanitarian groups would not. And that’s built FBR into a movement that fields teams and tracks human-rights abuses across Burma’s front lines and beyond, from northern Syria to Sudan. But critics say Eubank is a Christian zealot who is risking the lives of his family and followers in a vacuum of oversight. They claim FBR is blurring the line between humanitarian work and ideological activism by training and, at times, fighting alongside armed groups while preaching the Gospels of Jesus.

At 62, Eubank is still fighting fit, with a lean, compact frame, oversize feet in constant motion, and eyes that seldom blink beneath the brim of his camo hat. On this December morning, he’s leading his biggest mission yet: a two-week trek through eastern Karen State to deliver critically needed

aid, scope enemy positions, and test the nerves of 205 new rangers. The crux of the day is crossing a road that links two Burma Army bases and sees frequent government patrols. Eubank has done it dozens of times, but in the past could rely on stealth and the agility of small numbers in the event of a firefight. This year’s group is more than triple the size of any before it.

In February 2021, a decade-long period of quasi-democracy ended in Burma (now known as Myanmar) when the military seized back power in a coup. Protesters were gunned down in the streets and opposition supporters arrested, tortured, and disappeared. But unlike past uprisings, this generation is refusing to back down. Revolutionary militias called People’s Defence Forces (PDFs) made up of mostly

TRAINING CAMP
In an unusual arrangement, FBR and ethnic resistance groups cooperate, drill and work out side by side under Eubank’s direction



Burmans, the country’s ethnic majority, are attacking the regime in cities and lowland areas that have never before seen fighting, and bolstering ethnic armed groups in the borderlands. Violence in Burma is, according to Eubank, “at its highest level since World War II”. In 2022, 15 rangers were killed in the field, the deadliest year yet.

Under pressure, the junta’s army is doing what it always has but at greater scale: torching villages; executing political prisoners; and deliberately targeting schools, churches and large civilian gatherings with airstrikes to sow terror. “There is a level of anger and frustration [in the Burma Army] that basically, given the spread of martial law, says you can do what you fucking want and you can get away with it,” says Anthony Davis, a Bangkok-





One by one, the long procession of rangers files past. Greenhorns and seasoned instructors and ethnic fighters are mingled with about 30 foreign volunteers, including Eubank's always smiling, deceptively tough wife, Karen, and three children, who have spent the better part of their lives in the jungle. Daughters Sahale, 22, and Suuzanne (named after Burmese Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi), 20, drive a string of pack horses bearing medical supplies. Pete, 17, strolls past with his pet macaque clinging to his shoulders.

I follow a KNLA fighter down the road when he notices some of the elephant grass has been trampled and waves me back. The Burma Army appears to have patrolled earlier that morning, and the scouts missed the signs. It's likely fresh mines have been planted nearby. We retrace our steps back to the junction and keep watch.

When the last ranger finally goes by, Eubank embraces his militia friends and then, in an unusual move for the leader of a relief organisation, presses a little cash into their hands. "Christmas present," he whispers, thanking them in a Karen dialect. Then he starts bounding up the trail towards his place at the front of the line, at once excited and relieved to have slipped the Burma Army again.

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be lugged in a backpack. And if something goes wrong, there are no hospitals or medevacs. The combination of time needed, physical rigour, and a general lack of appetite among media outlets has reduced coverage to a trickle, despite the Burma Army's staggering record of atrocities.

Starting in late December, I spent three weeks with Eubank and the rangers in the jungle, going on missions and trying to understand what would drive a man to not just lead a crusade in the bush but to also haul his wife and children with him. In nearly two decades of conflict reporting, I've never encountered anyone like Eubank – an ardent believer with deeply held conservative values willing to risk his own life and family for a faraway cause. And not only offer much-needed aid and relief to the persecuted and battle-scarred, but also money and muscle. The heroic and unsettling walking side by side.

I first crossed paths with Eubank back in 2012, en route to northern Kachin State to make a film about the Burma Army's theft of resources and attacks against civilians. In a deserted airport in China, I passed the Eubanks on their way home after a two-month mission. They wore shirts that read "Free the Oppressed" and carried themselves with the jovial manner of a family on holiday.

Later, I learned Eubank was nicknamed "Mad Dog" and "Father of the White Monkey", and led an all-volunteer staff of ethnic minorities and foreigners – many of them ex-military – working on the front line. Controversially, some team members carried weapons, ready to fight the Burma Army if they came under attack. Others carried video cameras to document war crimes. Word was the charismatic American triathlete

based security analyst. Thousands have died, and more than 3 million people are internally displaced. In March 2022, the US government made an official determination that the Burma Army committed genocide and crimes against humanity against the Rohingya minority. That has done nothing to dim the military's aggression. Reports of rape, torture and beheadings are widespread. And with violence at an all-time high, demand among resistance groups for the aid and expertise FBR offers has surged.

All of which makes crossing this Burma Army road trickier than usual. The junction is a riot of overgrowth and we're late, raising the odds of running into a government patrol. Although FBR-allied rebel fighters from the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) have scouted the area in advance, one enemy base is less than a mile away. On previous occasions, Eubank, who carries a 9mm handgun under his shirt, has run into soldiers guarding the crossing at night and had to back off.

ETTING INSIDE BURMA to report on its ethnic conflicts has never been easy. For decades, the country, home to more than 51 million people and 135 officially recognised ethnic groups, was closed like a tropical North Korea: the government kept a black list of journalists, entire regions were off-limits, and legions of plainclothes security agents tracked one's every move. Since the coup, travel outside major cities has become next to impossible. Linking up with rebel groups requires crossing borders and hiking from several days to a week through calf-busting mountains with fluid front lines. Travel is, with rare exceptions, on foot, and provisions must



could cover 40-plus miles of hostile terrain in a single day while preaching the good book.

Burma's lawless depths have attracted plenty of G.I. Joe wannabes with a messiah complex. From a distance, it's easy to think of Eubank as a Bible-thumping mashup of Colonel Kurtz and Captain Fantastic. But even the most hard-boiled Southeast Asia hands agree that in a world of counterfeits, Eubank is the real deal: a diehard humanitarian who has risked his life time and again to help the most vulnerable in a forsaken place that most Americans can't find on a map.

"I admire [FBR's] commitment, valour and humanity. They don't pretend to be anything other than what they are: in solidarity with people being targeted in war," says Dave Mathieson, an independent analyst who tracks conflict and humanitarian matters in Burma. "One can take issues with militarised approaches to aid, especially when tied with fervent religious beliefs, but when it works so productively with FBR, it can't be faulted." Or as Phil Thornton, a veteran journalist based on the Thai-Burma border, puts it: "He's a bit mad, but he does great stuff."

For his part, Eubank dismisses any notion that he's running a paramilitary operation. "We don't have the most dangerous job in the world because we're not trying to fight the Burma Army; we're trying to avoid them and help people," Eubank says. "There are organisations that are bigger, stronger, better than us, but if they won't go, you gotta go," he adds. "I keep praying, and God keeps sending me."

Eubank prays aloud more often than anyone I've ever met. On the phone, when under attack, for large crowds and passing strangers, even midsentence. Often he'll be talking in his crisp, rapid-fire cadence and then slip in a prayer that's only discernible by the closing phrase, *In Jesus' name, amen*. Such religiosity can come across as pious and performative when delivered from the pulpit. With Eubank, though, all the prayer somehow feels endearing, a genuine hedge against existential threats that are very real.

Eubank insists that love is the force that drives him to take extreme risks, and also what makes FBR so effective. "[You will] run forward through the bullets, even if you don't know the person you're trying to save," he says. "If I'm shot and I'm bleeding out on the trail and dying and I can't see my wife and kids again – if I'm not doing that for love, what a disaster."

Born in Texas and brought to Thailand by missionary parents, Eubank spent his childhood in the hills around Chiang Mai. He accompanied his father to remote villages to spread the word, and could shoot a rifle, swim and ride bareback

by the age of five. The war in neighbouring Vietnam was ramping up, and it stoked an inborn desire to test himself and, as he says, "get into the fight as soon as possible". He got into trouble, looked for brawls at school and in the street. His Boy Scout troop was trained by US Special Forces and CIA on leave from the war.

Determined to go to war and "fight for freedom", Eubank went to Texas A&M University



PRAYER WARRIORS

Eubank puts recruits through rigorous physical tests. He asks them to consult God before missions, telling them, "Be sure it's part of his plan for you"



on a Reserve Officers' Training Corps scholarship and entered the Army. At 22, he commanded a platoon in Panama and was selected for a Ranger unit based in Washington state, where he was later assigned to lead a Special Forces A-team. Between missions, he summited peaks in the Cascades, married and divorced, and began to question life in the military. He met Karen, then a special-education teacher. Leaving the Army 10 years in as a major, he enrolled in seminary and pursued her with the same zeal as everything else.

In 1993, Eubank was invited back to Southeast Asia by a tribal leader of the Wa, an ethnic group in northern Burma facing a drug crisis. He took it as a sign from God and told Karen he'd like her to join him as his wife. She agreed, plunging headlong into a life she couldn't have imagined. "I had never planned to travel overseas," she says. "And then I'm riding in the back of a huge truck with resistance fighters, guns poking me all over the place."

Four years later, the couple founded FBR in response to a Burma Army offensive that uprooted more than 500,000 people. Volunteers had to meet three requirements: be literate, not run away from the enemy if villagers could not, and do the work "for love" since no one is paid.

Having kids and bringing them up inside Burma came with risks. But the communities and fellow rangers embraced the Eubank children as their own, cultivating a bond forged in shared danger. While Eubank was out running missions, Karen home-schooled the kids and saved them from vipers lurking in the toilet. She launched a children's programme and expanded it with their help. Over the years, the kids endured life-

threatening illness, sniper fire, airstrikes and the loss of loved ones – but also experiences and perspectives that few contemporaries can share.

"Growing up here versus America was a blessing we didn't deserve," says Sahale. "When I hear the word 'trauma', it's hard for me because this is our life, and I feel like in this day and age, people use trauma as a way to excuse their behaviours.... Our [ethnic Karen] aunts and uncles smile through their pain – they choose joy and gratefulness – which is inspirational because they have nothing, but they give everything."

Every summer, the Eubanks travel the US to see friends, share their story and raise money. In between donor meetings and church events, the family motors around in a mud-streaked Toyota rig on escapades that range from skydiving and mountain climbing to bear hunting in Alaska. The kids are known to drop into the Cody Nite Rodeo in Wyoming on borrowed horses and win belt buckles.

In October, I met up with the Eubanks outside College Station, Texas, near the end of their annual tour. Suuzanne and Sahale followed their dad's footsteps to A&M, and a whirlwind weekend kicked off with a rugby match. Eubank paced the sidelines cheering on Suuzanne while calling football patterns for Pete on an adjacent field. "Dave doesn't like to loiter," says Karen. From there, Eubank caught a helicopter to a wedding he was officiating in Hill Country.

The next day, he's at it again at back-to-back church fundraisers. Eubank is a gifted public speaker, sincere even when he's repeating his stump speech for the 10,000th time. After a short video featuring FBR medics at work under fire, he riffs for 20 minutes about the value of sacrifice. "You can live with sorrow, but you can't live with shame," he says, with a paternal warmth that strikes a bracing contrast to his war-zone bravura. The programme closes with Sahale on guitar, dressed in a native Karen vest, singing a heartfelt homage to a ranger friend killed in Karen State in July by a Burma Army airstrike.

Some believers are in tears, hands in the air. "People say, 'I have faith,'" says Willie Medlock, 51, a technician from Wimberley, Texas. "Well, you can say what you want to, but they're living it."



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HE EUBANKS' work has spread from conflict zone to conflict zone. In 2015, a Christian supporter asked if they would go to northern Iraq on his dime to help the embattled Kurdish minority. Islamic State militants were gaining ground, slaughtering villagers and raping women with impunity. Eubank questioned what little FBR could do in the Middle East desert. But he saw parallels in the plight of the Karen and the Kurds, a long-oppressed people and the largest ethnic group in the world without its own country.

When he showed up with Pete, then nine years old, the Kurdish minister of defence was stunned and tried to warn him off. Eubank countered that there were lots of kids in danger who were just as important to him, and FBR's work was always

a family affair. In the ensuing months, Eubank and his team, some of them ethnic volunteers from Burma, provided food and medical support to Yezidis escaping ISIS massacres. They fought alongside Kurdish *peshmerga*, and assisted in ISIS-ravaged Syrian towns such as Kobani and Manbij. "We were just going *boom-boom* from Syria to Iraq, one fight to the other," Eubank recalls.

By 2017, all attention turned to liberating Mosul, the seat of the group's self-proclaimed caliphate. As hundreds of thousands fled, FBR volunteers fought alongside Iraqi Army special forces in block-to-block combat while Karen and the kids cared for the wounded. One of Eubank's comrades was killed beside him; another took six shots and lived. In one battle, Eubank found himself four yards from a group of ISIS fighters; he was shot in the arm, but says he managed to kill three of them "point-blank" and stay in the fight.

One scorching June morning, FBR found a heap of more than 50 bodies on the outskirts of the city – men, women, and children – cut down by ISIS snipers while trying to escape. A young girl, no older than five, her hair tied with pink ribbons, peeked out from under the hijab

of her dead mother. The bodies were 150 yards away, and the snipers had a clear shot. Eubank plotted a rescue. Iraqi forces coordinated a smoke barrage with the US-led coalition, and he edged closer behind a tank as bullets pinged off the armour. 'If I die doing this, my wife and kids would understand,' he recalls thinking. In a harrowing 12-second dash captured on video, two FBR volunteers provide cover fire as Eubank scoops up the girl and carries her to safety.

After years of operating in the shadows, Eubank was thrust into the spotlight. A Christian leader of a humanitarian group engaging in firefights in a Muslim country would normally raise alarms, but the daring rescue video was featured on cable news and talk shows; newspapers profiled the Eubanks, and a faith-based company made a documentary about FBR. Donations spiked, along with volunteer enquiries.

Eubank calls FBR "ambassadors for Jesus". Prayer and proselytising are woven into their work. Some rangers are baptised in camp, but the group does not exclude non-believers. "You can be homosexual, you could be a murderer. You only have to say 'I don't think that's the best behaviour,

and I'm trying not to do those things,' and then you can join us," he says, adding that FBR includes atheists, agnostics and spirit worshippers.

Miles Vining, a former Marine and weapons expert who converted to Islam after deployments in Afghanistan, affirms that FBR does not pressure or cast judgement like the missionary groups he grew up around as the son of American diplomats in Thailand. "I got so incredibly sick of them because everywhere I looked I got God crushed down my mouth," he says. "In FBR, everything is action-based; [Eubank and his family] are showing their faith, saying, 'Look, this is what propels us, and we want to do good deeds. And if you want some of this, come on in. But if you don't, that's OK, too' – instead of saying, 'You're going to hell.'"

Still, the group's faith-forward, weapons-bearing ethos has drawn critics who question the way FBR operates. "FBR may have saved hundreds of lives or more," writes Alexander Horstmann, an associate professor of Southeast Asian Studies at Tallinn University, "but the way the organisation positions itself as an enemy of the Burma military is problematic, as is its active involvement and overlap with the ethnic-minority armies." Carrying guns stokes the age-old suspicion that aid groups are arms of intelligence agencies, and can make work more challenging for organisations that are trying to remain neutral. "Not unlike movie hero John Rambo," Horstmann notes, "Eubank presents himself as a warrior who comes to places of conflict to liberate innocent civilians from the claws of their oppressors."

Although medics are allowed to carry guns for self-defence under international humanitarian law, a November 2019 report by Offbeat Research, an open-source investigative group, suggests FBR has gone on offensives alongside Kurdish militias in Syria, citing the group's own video footage as evidence. (FBR denied that, but did note that its members have worn YPG patches in Syria.) Moreover, FBR trains rebels in skills like battlefield communications and land-mine removal, tactics that have plausible humanitarian applications but more strictly support combat efforts. "The existence of the FBR and their actions across Syria," the report says, "blur the line of humanitarian aid and targeted activism."

"We're not a militia, but we work in bear country," says Eubank. He insists that FBR never shoots first, but makes no bones of its support for pro-democratic causes, asserting that the traditional humanitarian approach of neutrality is one that "always favours the oppressor". He notes the time a US government official chastised him for aiding ethnic armed groups in Burma. The official touted Bosnia as an example where there was a "clear separation" between military and relief work, and a US battalion provided security while food was distributed. "That is good," Eubank replied. "Please send the US battalion to stop the Burma Army from attacking Karen, and we will gladly provide humanitarian assistance in safety."

"In many situations, resistance humanitarians are reaching people faster and better than orthodox humanitarians from neutral international agencies," writes Hugo Slim, a global authority on the ethics of war at Oxford University. Slim argues that the conventional approach often fails because it becomes bogged down by bureaucracy and requires the consent of predatory regimes, pointing out how aid agencies in Burma are seen as lacking courage, honesty and ingenuity as they avoid proper recognition of the injustice being carried out around them. Humanitarian resistance, Slim asserts, is both ethical and essential and should be embraced "by [international aid groups] and the governments that fund them".

One veteran rights investigator concedes that he used to be an avowed pacifist who would "butt heads" with Eubank over FBR's support of ethnic armed groups. But the brute horror of the Burma Army's campaign convinced him that FBR's bold approach is essential to relieve mass suffering. "If FBR wasn't filling those voids," he asks, "who would be?"



BR'S TRAINING CAMP sits in a valley carved by a stream in eastern Karen State. What the Eubanks started with a few bamboo huts and elephant labour has grown into a small village with a free medical clinic, spartan barracks, bunkers and training facilities, and a school for the offspring of volunteers split between "ethnics" (in FBR lingo) and foreigners, aka *galawas* (literally "white Indians"). The prevailing vibe is that of a very intense summer camp – one that is sometimes disrupted by Burma Army jets that streak low overhead.

When the Eubanks return in December – Dave, Karen and Pete from a mission in Syria, Suuzanne and Sahale on break from college – FBR staff and hundreds of ranger trainees line up to welcome them with handmade posters and smiles. The family greets everyone and drops their bags at a two-storey cabin plastered with a Bible verse from Philippians and with an office full of yellowed family photos: Eubank on the

summit of Denali, and praying with Mike Pence; the girls barrel racing; Pete riding bulls. A "Wall of Heroes" features portraits of 53 rangers killed in the field since FBR was founded.

Facing a 200,000-strong military armed with Russian jets and attack helicopters has not dimmed the trainees' spirits. They represent seven of the country's ethnic groups; about a quarter are seasoned fighters. Another quarter are ethnic Burmans – teachers, students, engineers, poets and shopkeepers – who have joined PDF militias, a shift that was unthinkable prior to the coup.

Twenty-year-old Gabaw Htoo is the face of a generation of unlikely revolutionaries. A lanky former gaming addict from the capital, Yangon, he sports milk-bottle glasses, a shorn head and





a bullet necklace he says he won't take off until the war is over. Htoo witnessed several friends killed in street protests when rubber bullets turned to live ones. After that, he and his crew decided they needed training to "get weaponised" and join the armed resistance. They considered everything from male prostitution to selling weed to raise money for guns, until a friend connected them with rebels in the eastern jungle.

"We were like aliens," recalls Htoo in English honed by watching *Breaking Bad*. He weighed more than 200 pounds with hair that fell down to his chest. "I couldn't even hold a knife; we were

DANGEROUS PASSAGE

The rangers cross a bamboo bridge in the remote Karen State. It takes days of hiking through the jungle to reach villages in need



useless, spoiled brats." Along with harsh terrain and lack of food, he had to overcome prejudices instilled by a racist regime that brainwashed Burmans into believing their superiority over the ethnic minorities: "'Cannibals,'" says Htoo. "We grew up with so much propaganda."

The Karen accepted them and taught them how to survive in the bush. Months of jungle slogs, sleeping in the rain, and subsisting on rice and fish paste hardened his body and resolve. His KNLA mentor gave him the nom de guerre Gabaw Htoo ("Bright Light").

While some tech-savvy people's militias are

jerry-rigging drones and 3D-printing rifles, most of Htoo's time in the KNLA was spent setting claymore mines and learning how to make homemade bombs with bamboo shafts, not always with good results. "Guys were always blowing themselves up," he says. "The training was a mess, and our leaders are so disorganised." Last year, the Burma Army ambushed his unit and killed five of Htoo's comrades. He escaped into the jungle and, after weeks on the run, linked up with his KNLA mentor, who sent him to FBR for more training – again the barrier between armed rebels and humanitarian-aid group proving permeable – though he still doesn't have a gun of his own. FBR does not issue weapons to trainees, and only a fraction of rangers have rifles. (Many are "franken-guns" held together with homemade parts: Vietnam-era

M-16s, captured Burma Army MA3 rifles, and even M-1 carbines of Second World War vintage.) “I have a three-year plan,” Htoo says. “The first was for failure, the past year for training, and this year will be for getting guns and fighting.”

For all his experience, Eubank likes to temper recruits’ eagerness for combat. He cites a botched attack in the nearby village of Limerplaw in December as a warning. Seventy per cent of KNLA grenades failed to explode. When the smoke cleared, the mission had failed, and five fighters were dead and 26 were injured. Eubank exhorts the rangers to assess the enemy carefully and question superiors if they are in doubt about an operation – but above all, to pray first. “If you are going to risk your life or take someone’s life, you must be sure this is God’s mission for you,” he warns. “Otherwise, don’t do it.”

Eubank rises each morning before dawn for a five-mile run and calisthenics. Then he takes care of email and other administrative tasks he loathes, then tours the camp. He’ll “stress test” his kids at random, handing them an M-16 and calling out worst-case scenarios (“You’re in a helicopter, animal’s getting away, and you’ve got a malfunction”). He picks up rubbish discarded by rangers (“They’re cheating themselves, leaving crumbs for the Burma Army”), and his sudden presence at training stations hits the bone-tired recruits like a jolt of caffeine. On a “ranger run” with the entire class through the mountains, he crests a summit and orders everyone to the ground for pushups. “Easy way or hard way,” he yells out after 20. “Hard way!” comes the response, and Eubank bangs out 10 more.

Decades of wear and tear have taken their toll, and Eubank’s body is slowing a bit but “his brain and competitiveness are not,” says Dave Small, an ex-Canadian Army officer who has worked with Eubank since he was 15. “He can still out-endure anyone – and that’s just mental. He goes as hard as he can.”

During the annual basketball game between ethnics and galawas, a shirtless Eubank is all hustle. He’s setting picks and stifling his man. But the man guarding him keeps fouling; after one too many, Eubank snaps, grabs him by the shoulders, and throws him to the ground. After the game ends with the foreigners on top, Eubank pulls the ranger he slammed in for a hug.

Later on, I accompany Eubank downriver to meet General Baw Gyaw, the battle-hardened leader of the KNLA. I struggle to keep pace as Eubank explains that it was Baw Gyaw, a fellow Christian, who granted him the land for FBR’s training camp and free movement across his territory. “None of this would be possible without

Baw Gyaw’s blessing,” says Eubank. “He trusts us.”

We cross a bamboo bridge and strip camouflage netting off an FBR truck for the drive to Da Bu No. Once home to 5,000 people, the village has become a ghost town of shuttered shops and derelict homes. Repeated Burma Army bombings since the coup have wiped out families, shredded school houses, and levelled a KNLA command centre. “Everyone is hiding in the jungle,” Eubank says. “It’s really sad.”



THE PRICE OF WAR

Dave consoles Suuzanne after she learns one of her “uncles” was killed by the Burma Army



Baw Gyaw receives us at a teak house surrounded by guards with M-4 rifles. Eubank gives him a big hug and gifts him a Ka-Bar knife and some fresh FBR shirts. A short, stocky man dressed in jungle boots and fatigues, the general has a shrapnel scar on his left temple and changes shirts to reveal additional scars down his chest and stomach, the markings of a lifetime of guerrilla warfare.

Eubank launches into an update on ranger training and efforts to secure outside support for the resistance. Four days earlier, President Biden had signed into law the BURMA Act, hailed by some advocates as the “most significant action” the US has taken for Burma in decades. The bill pledges tighter sanctions against the junta and greater support for pro-democracy groups fighting inside the country. But aid for ethnic armies was not included, and there was no mention of arms. (Though Eubank is friendly with Republican members of Congress, he denies any connection to US intelligence agencies – an assertion that appears borne out by FBR’s low-budget operations and the shoddy weapons used by the rebels.)

Baw Gyaw is blunt when asked what he needs

most: better weapons. The Burma Army receives aircraft and artillery from China and Russia, and there’s only so much his fighters can do against such firepower. “The US should have started helping us a long time ago, before the Chinese got so involved,” says the general. “It’s still a good time to help us.”

Eubank has lobbied Congress for years to back the resistance. But the US is already spending billions in its proxy war in Ukraine; neighbouring

Thailand has no interest in midwifing the revolution; and China, the only foreign power involved in Burma’s conflicts, would not take kindly to US meddling in its backyard. What’s more, even if there was a will among the US and Western allies to arm the resistance, the jumble of ethnic militias and PDFs lack a central command and a shared strategy to defeat the Burmese military. “Who should the West support? How and with what?” says Bertil Lintner, a specialist on Burma’s affairs and insurgencies in Asia. “I can’t see any significant Western support coming any time soon.”

Despite their common enemy, the major armed groups in the borderlands are plagued by disunity. In Karen, the KNLA is also fighting several breakaway Karen proxy forces allied with the regime, which long ago mastered a divide-and-conquer strategy.

“Burmese resistance movements and political opposition are their own worst enemies,” says Mathieson, who has spent more than two decades studying the country. “Any viable resistance is consistently hobbled by division. Never has a country been betrayed so much by such poor leadership.”

Baw Gyaw, for his part, believes victory will come in his lifetime. “It’s never easy to unite all the groups, but right now most of us share the same goal, and we are committed to fighting to the end,” he says, buoyed by the influx of ethnic Burmans taking up arms alongside his forces. One of his advisers estimates the Burma Army has lost more than 15,000 men out of a frontline strength of 140,000 since the coup. Many units in Karen are stranded and facing constant harassment, which has made them more dependent on airstrikes.

“You’ve got to think of [the Burma Army] as this giant bull in a field,” explains Davis, the security analyst. “There’s a lot of little dachshunds running around biting its legs. Sooner or later, the bull is going down and all these dogs are gonna be on its back, and at that point it begins to look like game over.”

“Barely, imperceptibly, slowly, I think, they are weakening,” Eubank agrees. “The resistance doesn’t have to win, they just have to hold on.”



O

N MISSIONS THE rangers bring gifts and entertainment to brighten the lives of the children living in harm's way. So on a sunny morning in the village of Tho Thoo Plaw, gaggles of displaced kids look on as the Eubanks and rangers host a "Good Life Club" workshop, rocking back and forth to a pounding bass line. Volunteers perform backflips and slapstick routines and dance to Kenny Chesney's 'All the Pretty Girls', before sweatshirts and cookies are handed out. It's surreal, goofy and joyous all at once, and Eubank revels in it.

The rangers are packing up camp when he gets word that Burma Army jets have bombed Da Bu No – again. Baw Gyaw is unscathed. But a ranger and a pair of volunteers narrowly missed getting killed, and one of FBR's last four-wheel-drive trucks was totalled. "This is war," Eubank

says. "We're gonna get them back." In the moment, he's more Special Forces operator than relief worker.

A short walk up the trail, we come to a school and church complex levelled by an airstrike. A Burma Army base looms above the village on a ridge just over a mile away, and fearful locals have cleared out. The Eubanks pray and film social media clips next to a blast crater. Eubank consoles a young boy wandering alone amid the wreckage and gives a wad of money to a man whose home was damaged. In the field, Eubank is quick to disburse whatever resources he has to whomever he deems in need. In 2022, a \$3 million budget was all spent by October. Eubank put an urgent call out to a group of nine Christian supporters and raised an additional million dollars within a week to cover operations for the rest of the year.

The ever-present threat of attack has driven villagers to hold their Sunday service in a tarpaulin shack tucked away under a giant stand of bamboo. Eubank stands up and offers to rebuild the church. "You can build it bigger, there's no budget," he says. "Me, I ask God,

MOMENTS OF JOY

The Eubanks children, Sahale, Suuzanne and Pete, perform for volunteers to lighten the mood



and he says put it in the exact same place. You can build two – one here, one there. And if they destroy it again, we'll build it again. It's a contest between hate and love, and because of Jesus, love will win." Eubank asks everyone to pray on

it. Although the fervour has gripped him, his congregation does not look convinced.

In the morning, the rangers hold another variety show at the bomb site to rally the community. Music blares and children dance, and for a few hours the war is forgotten, until Eubank announces that one of FBR's original rangers, Baw Boe, was killed earlier in the day filming a Burma Army offensive in western Karen. Baw Boe was a "padi" (uncle) to the Eubank kids since they were infants, carrying them on his shoulders and teaching them everything he knew about life in the jungle.

Suuzanne, usually stoic, is caught off-guard by the news. Eubank apologises for not telling her first, holding her close as tears stream down her face. Another extended family member lost and the second ranger to die in the new year.



E

UBANK'S STAUNCHLY held conservative values fly in the face of his high-risk life on the extreme margins. His war stories are a torrent of near-death experiences that beggar belief: shooting his way out of ambushes, evading Burma Army forces closing in on three sides, or coming face-to-face with an ISIS fighter in a trench – the tales often close with the punchline *We almost got smoked*. A few admirers half-joked that he wants to die in the jungle. “I’ll put it this way,” says one longtime FBR volunteer, “things tend to happen when Dave is around.”

While the Eubanks make a point of keeping their children away from the front line, the kids have survived just about every threat that comes with operating inside a war zone. This exposure has moved some to accuse the parents of recklessness – though “never,” Eubank points out, “from the people we are standing with under fire.”

There was the time in Syria, in 2018, when the family had to travel by public bus through Assad-controlled territory to reach Afrin, then under assault by jihadists. Recognised by *mukhabarat* agents at a checkpoint and told to wait, Eubank was not going gently to a Syrian prison. He instructed the children to walk off the bus and, if the agents gave chase, throw hand grenades he’d passed out earlier “as far as you can and run for your lives. And don’t worry about me. I’m gonna throw mine, shoot everyone I can shoot, reload,

CIVILIANS TARGETED

Five civilians killed in a Burma Army attack on a village near where the FBR operates. Last year was the deadliest in the world’s longest-running war



and run.” The Syrians shouted after the family as they stepped into the street and ran more than 400 yards to the safety of a Kurdish checkpoint.

I ask Eubank if there was ever a moment in hindsight where he felt he’d gambled with his children’s lives. “No,” he shoots back, with the caveat he might have been a

beat too slow on deciding to leave that bus in Syria. “I know my kids and what they can do. My daughters, they’re nice. But they will shoot.” And apparently throw grenades.

More recently, in the Karen village of Simerplaw, a widow told the Eubanks she’d given up trying to plant rice after the Burma Army shot at her. The family followed her back to the paddy. Eubank and a ranger then crept into the paddy with handfuls of rice sprigs and a volley of gunfire poured in, bullets striking within feet of Karen and the kids at the rear. The episode was

filmed and packaged into an FBR report called *Planting Rice Under Fire*.

Getting shot at for a rice-planting photo-op? This smacked of a stunt. But Eubank explains how there had been cloud cover when he went into the field that unexpectedly lifted and exposed him to the enemy. He maintains that this, too, was “not reckless”. When the Eubanks returned to the village seven months later, the widow, Naw Thraw Gay, presented them with a sack of rice. The Burma Army soldiers who shot at them later defected. A photo of them smiling with the Eubanks appears in FBR’s annual report.

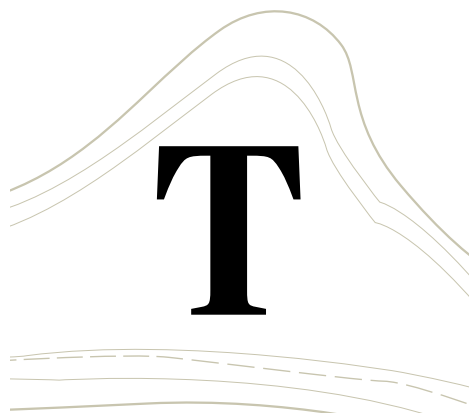
When we reach Simerplaw, Eubank summons Naw Thraw Gay to share her side of the story. I ask what she thinks of the Eubanks? Are they crazy? “No, no,” she says, flashing a betel-stained smile. “They helped and gave us confidence so that we can go on with our lives. We feel braver with them among us.” Indeed, after the shooting incident, she and her neighbours went back to their fields at night to finish planting rice.

Our next and final stop on the mission loop is Limerplaw, scene of the disastrous KNLA attack on the Burma Army outpost. The trail segues from dense jungle to dry paddy fields punctured by limestone formations that would be swarming with backpackers were it not for the war. Near the village, we drop into the shadow of a sheer rock wall, and the air is rent by a series of booms on the other side. Bursts of gunfire crackle through the valley, and there are rumours the KNLA has initiated another drone attack.

The fighting kicks up again when we reach camp. We’re told Suuzanne, Sahale and Pete arrived an hour before us and headed straight to a cave they have explored since they were kids. Getting to the entrance requires traversing open ground in the direct firing line of the Burma Army outpost. Eubank decides to check on them, concerned but not worried. “They know to hide in the bamboo over there if there’s trouble,” he says, pointing to a band that rings the base of the mountain.

Bypassing the mouth of the cave, Eubank climbs up to a ledge and discovers a rebel hideout that connects down to the main subterranean passage. I follow him up, and the floor is strewn with IV bottles, unexploded rocket-propelled grenades, and torn trousers soiled with blood. Stalactites loom above us like daggers. “This is pretty cool,” says Eubank, caught between war and wonder, living out a life he imagined as a boy.

Voices echo from the cave’s recesses, and Pete soon emerges below with his monkey and other volunteers. Sahale is trailing behind them, singing a song. The kids reassure their father that they ducked into the bamboo when the Burma Army and KNLA started shooting, just as they were taught to. “I know you did,” Eubank replies. “I love you.”



THE RANGERS ASSEMBLE the next morning for a final children’s programme. Suuzanne and Sahale need to get back to university, and Gabaw Htoo and his fellow rangers must return to far-flung units to apply their training where it’s needed most. Back on a familiar trail, I’m contemplating the warm Coke I’m going to buy at the last KNLA checkpoint when faint rumbles begin to echo across the mountains. A Russian-made Yak-130 jet screeches low overhead soon after, snapping everyone’s gaze skyward. The canopy protects us. The question is, what was just hit?

At the checkpoint, Eubank gets a message on the radio: the bombs struck the village of Lay Wah, about 20 miles away, and there are conflicting reports of casualties. It’s late in the day, but he wants to go check it out. Karen, Suuzanne, Sahale and a few armed rangers jump into the flatbed of an FBR pickup, and Eubank tears off down dirt roads. The engine groans and the Eubank sisters croon ‘American Pie’ and ‘Country Roads’ as we rip around hairpins down to the river. A cable ferry takes us across, and we grind on until we see a truck bearing wounded.

The driver confirms that bombs levelled two local churches and a schoolhouse, killing five people, including a mother and her two-year-old girl. In the flatbed, Naw Chi Paw clutches her baby next to her teenage son. Her husband, a Catholic deacon, has been killed. Eubank puts his hand on her arm and says a prayer, then takes her phone number with a pledge to look after them. “We’ll come see you at the clinic tomorrow,” he assures.

It’s dark when we reach Lay Wah. Our headlight catches a hobbling water buffalo whose front leg was cut in half by shrapnel. Up on the plateau overlooking the village, the school and churches are blown to splinters. Four craters are surrounded with shards of glass, flip-flops, and splotches of fresh blood. Eubank records

the damage on his phone as Suuzanne collects bomb fragments, and a primary school teacher arrives with more details. Fearing airstrikes, she had already moved her students into the bush for classes. The bombs struck at around 2pm. Had the kids been in school, it would have been a massacre.

Another villager bids us to follow him into the jungle. A short walk along an ink-black footpath brings us to a clearing bathed in candlelight where five bodies are laid out under sheets – or what remains of them. Unbidden, the man strips away the cloth to show what the airstrike had done. Stumps of legs were all that was left of a church assistant. The pastor, badly mangled, lies next to the deacon, mother and child, both of whom were killed by shrapnel to the head. On the drive out, the water buffalo is groaning on the ground. Eubank dutifully stops and puts the beast out of its misery by shooting it in the head.

THIS IS EVIL, man. And this has been happening for 73 years,” Eubank says on the drive back. The deaths were cruel and arbitrary, the kind that defies logic or any belief system, and they will make no difference in the outcome of this war. Eubank has seen many lifetimes worth of such killing. If there was one thing that surprised non-Christian friends who know him more than the fact that he was still alive after all these years, it was that he still believed in a God who allows innocents to be slaughtered so brutally.

“That’s one of the great paradoxes of faith,” he tells me. “I don’t understand that to this day.” He admits that he has “lots of doubts – they just don’t do me any good. The result of an evidently rational response to death and suffering is a hard heart, bitterness, anger, depression,” he goes on. “The opposite is to ask God for help. I’m gonna praise you and say ‘I love you’ no matter what. I practise that. And the result of that is I’m lighthearted, my vision is bigger, I’m bolder, and I have more energy. So which is actually the rational response?”

A week after I left Burma, Eubank began a two-month mission to Karenni State, scene of the fiercest fighting in the country. Trips to Syria and Iraq would follow, and friends are pushing him to go to Ukraine. Part of him wants to bring FBR to a new frontier, but “we’re just not that big,” he says, torn between a compulsive drive and spreading FBR too thin as the civil war in Burma deepens and the world looks away.

Eubank recalled a time when Armenian friends requested FBR’s help in their fight against Azerbaijan. He was interested, but the trip didn’t work out, which Pete assured him was for the best. “He said, ‘I’m glad we didn’t go, Dad. We’re FBR. We go to the broken places with no rules, like the Wild West – that’s where we belong,’” Eubank says. “And I think he’s right.” ®

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SOUNDTRACK OF THE SUMMER

Rolling Stone UK selects the pick of this year's festivals both at home and abroad





THE GREAT ESCAPE

10-13 MAY, BRIGHTON

Taking over the seaside city of Brighton every year with over 500 fresh faces, The Great Escape is the king of the UK's new music festival scene. West London post-punks Butch Cassidy, indie-folk duo Lilo, the Isle of Wight's Coach Party, rising DJ-producer I. Jordan, the Billie Eilish-approved JGrrey, Dirty Hit signee Sipho, hotly tipped band English Teacher, Danny Brown collaborator Petite Noir, and the mythology-steeped The Last Dinner Party are just a handful of highlights from a packed line-up. Undoubtedly the one to attend if you want "I saw them when they were just starting out!" bragging rights to annoy your mates with for eternity.

Tems at
TGE 2022



Saturday 13 May – Rolling Stone
UK presents Arlo Parks, EEE GEE
and The Joy at Brighton Dome
Concert Hall

MALLORCA LIVE

18-20 MAY, CALVIÀ

The dulcet tones of Black Eyed Peas' will.i.am, a nostalgic sing-song courtesy of The Kooks, the dance stompers of Peggy Gou and the picture-postcard beaches of the Balearics all in one place, you say? While Mallorca Live's line-up might be fairly chaotic, rapidly hopping from the NYC dance-punk of !!! to techno DJ Mall Grab and The Chemical Brothers, that's surely part of this beachy bash's central appeal.



WIDE AWAKE 27 MAY, LONDON

Not to be confused with the Katy Perry song of the same name, Brockwell Park's Wide Awake does a cracking job at pulling in an eclectic blend of newer names. Alongside established bill-toppers like Caroline Polachek, Black Country, New Road, Daniel Avery and Alex G, they've also enlisted sure-to-be-massive grunge-rockers Blondshell, art-pop duo Jockstrap, Goat Girl solo spin-off Naima Bock and Melbourne's psych-jazz heads Glass Beams.



Primavera Sound Barcelona, 29 May-4 June

One of Spain's biggest and best-known festivals, Primavera has expanded over the years, with newer editions of the event now taking place in Madrid, Porto, Buenos Aires and São Paulo. Their Barcelona outpost, however, is where it all started. Since the bulk of the music happens from late afternoon onwards, it's possible to squeeze in a bit of a city break and roll straight from the beach to the Parc del Fòrum later on. As well as an opening show from Pet Shop Boys, the line-up also features Blur, New Order, a newly reunited Le Tigre, Rosalía, Kendrick Lamar, St Vincent, much-buzzed-about group Gabriels, the pop theatre of Christine and The Queens, Fred again.. and Kelela. Best of all, that first-rate selection of acts barely scrapes the surface of the music on offer.



LIVE AT LEEDS

27 MAY, TEMPLE NEWSAM

A fixture of the northern city for the past 16 years, this year's festival takes place in the grounds of Temple Newsam, a stately home 15 minutes from the city centre. On Rolling Stone UK's very own stage, you'll find The Hives, Maximo Park, Everything Everything, The Big Moon, The Beths, Lime Cordiale, Gengahr and Pillow Queens. Of course, it's unlikely that you'd want to hang out anywhere else, but those with the urge to explore will also run across the likes of Black Honey, Two Door Cinema Club, The Lathums and Kate Nash.

MIGHTY HOOPLA

3-4 JUNE, LONDON

Noughties pop aficionados, this pop-centric party in London's Brockwell Park can make you whole again. The genius creation of the squad behind legendary LGBTQ+ club night Sink the Pink nails the Y2K brief with acts like Natasha Bedingfield, Rachel Stevens, Jamelia, Kelly Rowland, A1, Sophie Ellis-Bextor, *X Factor* winner Michelle McManus, Vengaboys, and Steps' Lisa Scott-Lee. But this isn't just a trip down memory lane — as well as left-field pop acts like Years & Years and Confidence Man, you'll find top-notch dance music (think: Róisín Murphy, Midland and DJ collective Queer House Party) and all kinds of other weird and wonderful fun, ranging from drag shows to Queerly Come Dancing. Anyone else up for karaoke with Barry from *EastEnders*?



GLASTONBURY

21-25 JUNE, SOMERSET

So often repeated that it's become a cliché whispered by wizened old hippies up the Stone Circle every year, Glastonbury is about so much more than the music, man! Whether you're hellbent on basking in the gong baths at the Healing Fields, sweating out your sins at legendary on-site queer club NYC Downlow, or trying to track down the ever-elusive hidden Rabbit Hole, it'd be easy to spend an entire weekend on Worthy Farm without venturing anywhere near its iconic Pyramid Stage. That would be a shame, however. With well over 100 stages, everybody and their dog is playing the festival, but at the top of the bill you'll crucially find Arctic Monkeys, Elton John, Lizzo, Guns N' Roses, Lana Del Rey, Wizzkid, Lil Nas X, and a teatime legends slot from Yusuf/Cat Stevens.



OPEN'ER

28 JUNE-1 JULY, GDYNIA, POLAND



Held in the middle of a huge airfield on the northern coast of Poland, Gdynia's Open'er festival has a lot going for it in between its impressive industrial surroundings, abundance of cheap beers, and big names like Arctic Monkeys, Lizzo, Lil Nas X, SZA, and Kendrick Lamar heading up the bill. Elsewhere you'll also find cumbia-peddling punks Los Bitchos, a nostalgia shot in the shape of Paolo Nutini (with his new shoes on, no doubt), bass supremo Thundercat, Young Fathers, PinkPantheress and plenty of on-site art shows and film screenings if you're feeling particularly cultured.

Montreux Jazz Festival,

30 June-15 July.

This Swiss destination has plenty of be-boo-bopping on offer — but there's far more to this festival than world-class jazz and its infamous jam sessions. Alongside legends like Bob Dylan, Lionel Richie and Nile Rodgers & Chic, some of music's most exciting new names — including emerging talent DoeChii, BRITs Rising Star victors FLO, and indie-pop artist Cat Burns — are making their way to Lake Geneva. As well as passes for the whole event, the festival also flogs individual show tickets for punters hoping to pick and choose.

MAD COOL

6-8 JULY, MADRID

If fuelling up for festival revelry every day with a gigantic plate of tapas sounds like your calling in life, Madrid's Mad Cool — which found a home in the city back in 2016 — may well be the place to do it. Bill-toppers range from Liam Gallagher, Lil Nas X, Queens of the Stone Age and The Black Keys, to Janelle Monáe, The 1975, Lizzo and Machine Gun Kelly, with the likes of King Princess, Raye, Honey Dijon, Genesis Owusu and Mimi Webb also heading to the Spanish festival. Still on the fence? Two words that will hopefully tip you over the edge: Robbie Williams.



NOS ALIVE

6-8 JULY, LISBON

Here in the UK, Nos admittedly brings to mind hundreds of little silver canisters strewn across town-centre pavements — but it also happens to be the completely unrelated name of the telecommunications company that sponsors an annual festival in downtown Lisbon. In place of hissing balloons, you'll find Red Hot Chili Peppers, The Black Keys, Arctic Monkeys, Lizzo, Queens of the Stone Age, Sam Smith, Rina Sawayama, Angel Olsen, IDLES, and much more in Portugal's getaway city.

EXODUS

8-9 JULY, ESSEX

Presented by London clubbing institution Fabric, EXODUS will apparently turn the surroundings of Kelvedon Hall — a whopping great manor house in Essex — into "a rave new world". A new face on the scene, it'll involve five woodland stages, all kinds of 'immersive' visual gubbins, and a beat-heavy bill. Highlights include genre-hopping Toronto talent Peach, New Jersey club star UNiiQU3, acid-house trailblazer A Guy Called Gerald, the versatile blends of Shy One, booty-bass leader DJ Assault, and a b2b set from tech-house head Craig Richards and minimal techno pioneer Ricardo Villalobos.



Rally, 5 August, London

If you're thinking 'Does London *really* need another day festival?' it's possible that Rally will make you eat your hat. A meeting of minds between GALA festival's team and indie promoters and Visions' head honchos Bird on the Wire, this newbie will take place in Southwark Park — and stands out with a fairly unique line-up. US rapper Princess Nokia, post rockers caroline and Squid, electro-punks PVA and psych-minded afrobeat artist Obongjayar are all present and correct, alongside big names in electronic music Kelly Lee Owens, John Talabot, Leon Vynehall and Lorraine James.

GREEN MAN

17-20 AUGUST, POWYS, WALES

Tucked away in the middle of the beautiful Brecon Beacons, Welsh festival Green Man is one of the UK's best-looking concerts — but there's plenty of substance too. Alongside 70s new wave icons Devo, psychedelic rock stalwarts Spiritualized, influential art-rockers The Walkmen and jazz reinventors The Comet Is Coming, they've brought in plenty of emerging talent, too, including Sudan Archives, Special Interest, and Ztella.





FIB

13-16 JULY, BENICÀSSIM, SPAIN

Besides being every music-loving Millennial's nostalgic fever dream — The Offspring, Franz Ferdinand, The Wombats, Kaiser Chiefs, and mash-up kings 2ManyDJs are all on this year's line-up — the Festival Internacional de Benicàssim (or FIB, for short) is shaping up into a doozy. Sports Team, Nova Twins and Bastille are also among the many acts making the trip to scorching-hot Spain. Taking place on the coast, just north of Valencia, FIB occupies a slight niche in that — unlike a lot of Spanish city festivals — it offers on-site camping, just a couple of minutes away from the main arena. A word of warning, however: unless you're quick enough to secure a pitch site underneath the dappled shade of a sought-after tree, you will most probably melt.



LOWLANDS 18-20 AUGUST, BIDDINGHUIZEN, THE NETHERLANDS

There's a lot to be said for a festival which manages to quietly nail the smallest details every time. From its pristine campsites and markedly delicious food offerings to a main stage with (lower your voice to a sultry whisper) full rain cover for defence against Biddinghuizen's soggy climate, Lowlands honestly feels a little Utopian. This year, Billie Eilish, Florence + The Machine, Boygenius, Foals, Steve Lacy, Turnstile, Jessie Ware, Ezra Collective and MUNA are among the acts heading along. Oh, and did we mention there's also a lakeside mini-spa complete with hot tubs, spas and masseurs?



END OF THE ROAD 31 AUGUST-3 SEPTEMBER, DORSET

A staple happening late in the UK's summer festival season, it's always worth saving a bit of gas in the tank for this Dorset gem. Specialising in indie and folk, End of the Road nearly always succeeds in putting together a line-up that feels a little different from the rest of the pack, and their 2023 edition at Larmer Tree Gardens is no exception. Headed up by King Gizzard & The Lizard Wizard, Future Islands, and Wilco, acts lower down the bill continue to deliver the goods. Irish post-punks The Murder Capital, genre-fluid rapper Flohio, Colombian synth expert Ela Minus, Norwegian-American experimenter Okay Kaya and Master Peace are just a few of the many highlights.

HEADLINERS

Our line-up of essential festival favourites for the summer season

Drink up

Waiting for hours in a crush for your favourite artist to come on stage is thirsty work but air up® is here with a clever bit of food science to encourage you to stay hydrated. As you sip pure H2O from one of their bottles, flavoured air creates a perception of taste through smell, so you think you're drinking something much more exciting. Choose from 27 different flavoured scents, including lime, orange-passionfruit and even iced coffee.

air up® bottle, from £29.99, by air up®, uk.air-up.com



Keep warm

On-trend acid-neon fluorescent is the go-to hue for a festival overshirt or light jacket and this high-fashion hi-vis will keep out the evening chill. It's the perfect extra layer to have at your side as you dance from dawn to dusk.

Cotton-canvas overshirt, £145, by Stüssy at MR PORTER, mrporter.com

Tune in

Extend the euphoria well after the concert is over by listening to the track that truly got under your skin on repeat. Bower & Wilkins' new Pi7 and Pi5 in-ear true wireless headphones offer increased earbud battery performance (with five hours of listening time), enhanced wireless connectivity, a Bluetooth range of 25 metres and incredible sound.

Pi7 S2 in-ear true wireless headphones, £349, by Bowers & Wilkins, bowerswilkins.com



Tees, please

Anti-inspirational slogan tee anyone? Yes, please. If you can't join Hailee, Kendall or Gigi in the VIP section, you might as well wear a tee that's splashed with a generous dash of irony.

Nepo baby tee, £16, by ASOS, ASOS.com



Sole heaven

The Y2K trend continues to march onward as festival season begins and Timberland are right in step. A 90s classic, their boots are perfect for stomping hallowed yet muddy concert grounds. Using responsibly sourced materials, they feature PrimaLoft eco insulation and nubuck better leather, while also being super comfy for all-day wear.

Premium 6-inch boot for men and women, in yellow, £180, by Timberland, timberland.co.uk

Stay dry

With their quick-drying, lightweight material Reebok's brightly printed swim shorts are the perfect festival attire to keep you from getting drenched in a shower — or for wicking away moisture if things get sweaty.

Reebok swim shorts, £22.99, by Reebok, amazon.co.uk





Bring the party

Perfect for a road trip or chilling out in your campsite before the main event, Marshall's Middleton speaker is optimised to be loud. Fully portable, it utilises True Stereophonic, a multi-directional stereo sound created by Marshall. Designed to be at home in festival mud, it's dust and water resistant with over 20 hours of playing time — so you can keep partying till the sun comes up.

Middleton speaker, £269.99, by Marshall, marshallheadphones.com



Boot camp

We can pray to Rosalía for good weather, but if that fails, Hunter Boots have the answer with their original play short boot. They're perfect, rain or shine, without being too heavy, so you can dance freely to your favourite act. They're also available in prints, but monochrome is as timeless as The Beatles for us.

Original play short boot, £90, by Hunter Boots at Schuh, schuh.co.uk



Light and shade

THOMAS SABO are right on trend with their 90s-inspired sunglasses in vibrant colours. The Kim designs come in gorgeous pastel colourways, while their darker Havana and all-black styles feature a rotating Rebel at heart coin engraving on the temple, to add a hint of rock star to your outfit.

Kim sunglasses, from £179, by THOMAS SABO, THOMASSABO.COM



Star quality

Wacko Maria are paying homage to a line-up of legendary artists in their Spring/Summer 23 collection. Tupac gets some glorious gothic-print treatment on a sumptuous satin shirt that's ideal for an extrovert or super fan. It's certainly time for the celebrity graphic tee to make a comeback (which reminds us to root out our Rihanna Loud tee).

Tupac camp collar printed satin shirt, £530, by Wacko Maria at MR PORTER, mrporter.com

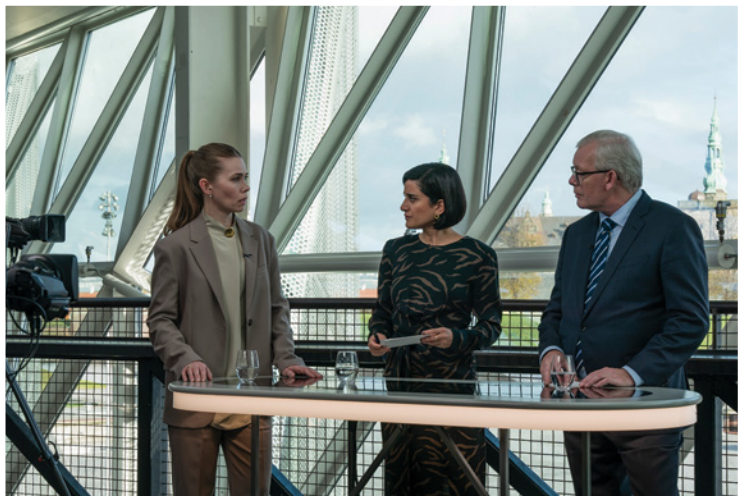


COPENHAGEN IN THE DARK

The Danish capital has been a star player in many a Nordic-noir TV series. Here, we take a look at its lighter and darker sides

By Matt Charlton





SCENE STEALER

(Opposite) The brooding Christiansborg Palace; (this page, from top) Copenhagen makes a stunning backdrop in *Borgen*; the palace colonnade leads to Frederick VII's statue

STAND, WEARING A suitably long and flowing woollen coat, gazing wistfully (yet defiantly) across Copenhagen harbour, the unforgiving Nordic 'spring' winds blasting my face. I may be here as a writer, but in my head, I am a promising junior minister, mentally jostling over whether to compromise my moral stance for a shot at power... the clock is ticking – the Statsminister needs my answer by 9pm. Or, in another scenario, I'm an outstanding yet tortured detective, recently suspended for getting too involved in my case, but deciding to proceed with the investigation nevertheless... to hell with the rules.

Since the late 00s, a great tidal wave of Nordic noir, starting with the likes of *The Killing* and *Wallander*, and continuing with the brilliant *The Bridge*, has placed Copenhagen front and centre of a trailblazing take on the crime procedural genre which made programme makers worldwide sit up and step up their drama game. *Borgen* – which returned for a new season on Netflix last year – adhered to the lofty Nordic-noir standards of being beautifully shot, acted, written and plotted, but there was very little 'noir' about it. Barring some covert night meetings, a few ruined marriages, and a dark back story or two, it always showed the Danish capital in the best light. Scandi noir then folded in a neon twist this year as *Copenhagen Cowboy* arrived on Netflix, adding some supernatural *Blade Runner*-esque Day-Glo to the muted Nordic tones. I'm here to see Copenhagen, this metropolis of noir backdrops, in both the light and the dark.

The best way to get to know a coastal city is



always from the water, and luckily, Copenhagen has quite a lot of it. I make my way to Ofelia Plads, a pier which, in the warmer months, hosts food trucks, entertainment, and even an urban beach. This is where Anthony, originally from the UK, runs Hey Captain 'social' boat tours, escorting up to 10 people on a two-hour 'Hidden Copenhagen' jaunt. Through roughly five different kinds of weather – I guess the Danish would call it a smörgåsbord – we witness a public dry ski slope built on top of a bio-incinerator, student housing made from shipping containers, and a rear view of the Little Mermaid statue.

Finally, we motor up the picturesque canal, coming face to face with Borgen from a subterranean perspective. 'Borgen' literally means 'the castle', and is the nickname given by the Danish to Christiansborg Palace – the

"OFELIA PLADS, IN THE WARMER MONTHS, HOSTS FOOD TRUCKS, ENTERTAINMENT, AND EVEN AN URBAN BEACH"

imposing baroque and neoclassical building which houses the Danish parliament and judiciary. Once you go inside, of course, in a typically Danish way, they have spliced this architecture with incredible modern interior design with sweeping stone staircases leading up to tastefully lit chambers, and Louis Poulsen's famous artichoke lamps hanging among the neo-gothic grandeur.

You can book a tour of parliament, however, the guide isn't usually former Foreign Minister



CREATING A MOOD

(This page, clockwise from left) getting to know Nyhavn, Copenhagen, by boat; the writer gets a lofty perspective; Sarah Lund rocks a Faroe Islands jumper in *The Killing*

and Social Liberal Party leader Martin Lidegaard, who also acted as a consultant on the most recent series of *Borgen*. We move through labyrinth-like corridors, which he evidently knows like the back of his hand, until we reach his office. There we talk for a while about what he brought to the new season, which, it turns out, was the main narrative arc: what would happen if a new source of oil was discovered in the Danish dependency of Greenland? He is also formerly the Minister of Climate Change and Energy, so it's a matter very close to his heart.

He then takes me to the staff canteen – a welcoming, airy space where rococo spaces rub up against – you guessed it – designer lighting. This isn't accessible to the public, but the Tower Restaurant, which I visit for lunch a few days later, situated in the tower of Christiansborg Palace, is. There aren't many restaurants where you have to pass through a bag scanner and metal detector before you are allowed in, but then this eatery is in the very heart of Danish democracy. My meal is a generously stacked 'open' sandwich, and I am poured a glass of schnapps – apparently traditional with a Danish lunch – which gets me drunk from just smelling it.

Afterwards, I have a lie-down at my hotel – the recently opened 25 Hours Indre By (meaning inner city). Housed in an old university, and right next to Danish landmark the Round Tower, the quirky and wonderfully appointed accommodation has kept up the educational theme, with blackboard feature walls, and historic texts such as Darwin's *Origin of the Species* and Su's *Crap Taxidermy*. There's a plush record-

PIECING TOGETHER

(Opposite, clockwise from top) Three million pieces of Venetian glass make up Ejnar Nielsen's arresting ceiling mosaic in August Bournonvilles Passage; *The Bridge* sees detectives investigate a body found on the Øresund Bridge between Denmark and Sweden; Angela Bundalovic stars as Miu in *Copenhagen Cowboy*



listening room downstairs too, although the only Danish musician I can think of is Whigfield.

Rested and schnapps fumes duly overcome, it's probably time to eat again. Il Buco is my next destination. This wonderful contemporary Italian restaurant now occupies the former blacksmith workshop where Prime Minister Birgitte Nyborg chooses to base her New Democrat Party in *Borgen*. I make my way there on foot along the cobbled streets, past Christiansborg, then the buildings which play fictional channel TV1's headquarters in the show, and the 'harbour bath' – a riverside swimming pool that's half busy with semi-naked people, despite the air temperature being roughly 5 degrees Celsius. What strikes me as I walk back after my meal that evening is how dark a city Copenhagen is – noir, in fact. Perfectly well-lit and safe, of course, but there are no floodlights

on the landmark buildings – another contribution towards the country's already impressive eco credentials... I wonder if Lidegaard was involved.

The following morning, sky suitably overcast, and strong gusts of wind alerting me to crevices I never knew I had, I take the Nordic noir walking tour. My guide, Christine, has an intricate knowledge of both Copenhagen and all things Scandi and dark. She takes me on an entertaining and interesting canter around the various sites used during the four seasons of *Borgen*, and into some dark corners you would normally not find on your own which were used for *The Killing* and *The Bridge*. For *Borgen* fans, there's The City Hall; the buildings on the harbour, which do a convincing turn as the headquarters of fictional TV1; the café where Kasper (*Game of Thrones*' Pilou Asbæk), buys Katrine (Birgitte Hjort Sørensen) a pastry and a coffee. "I remember the day this opened," recalls Christine, who moved here from France 25 years ago. "It was the first place you could get white bread and espresso in Copenhagen. Before that, I had gastronomic depression." I also learn about Sarah Lund's famous chunky jumper from *The Killing*. Hand-knitted on the Faroe Islands, the distinctive garments cost about £300 a pop,

"I AM POURED A GLASS OF SCHNAPPS — TRADITIONAL WITH A DANISH LUNCH — WHICH GETS ME DRUNK FROM SMELLING IT"

THE KILLING: NETFLIX; COPENHAGEN COWBOY: MAGNUS NORDENFJØR; THE BRIDGE: BBC/SVTKARL

"A FRENCH-ASIAN RESTAURANT CALLED BISTRO PANPAN WRAPS AROUND THE HOME OF THE MALE PANDA, XING ER"

but the designers failed in their legal bid to stop others producing cut-price versions.

The following day, in Frederiksberg – south of Indre By – I work my way through one of the oldest zoos in Europe in order to reach my next dining location. In the first episode of *Borgen* season 4, Nyborg holds a press conference in front of the panda enclosure at Copenhagen Zoo. This space is, in fact, a French-Asian restaurant called Bistro PanPan, which wraps around the home of the male, Xing Er, basically making him your dining companion, as the friendly staff pander to your every need.

I go to see Mao Sun, the female, who is basking on a rock in a separate enclosure, pass some depressed lions on my way out, and then bus over to Nørrebro, a district I am reliably informed by Lidegaard is the Kreuzberg of Copenhagen – all independent shops, shabby chic bars, street food and an artsy crowd. Nyborg meets her son – a main character in season 4 of *Borgen* – in local Nørrebro institution Tjili Pop, a hipster/student café-bar by day, and casual live music venue by night. It's hard not to fall in love with this city, mooching around the streets, picking through the vintage and record shops. People-watching is a particular pleasure here too, as everyone seems so well-dressed (they really know how to knot a scarf).

Despite the reliably unreliable Scandinavian weather, Copenhagen is eminently liveable – a buzzing and varied food scene, an open, artistic feel, and a thriving metropolis built on design, and, most interestingly, compromise – where the traditional meets the modern; where the classical meets the cutting edge; where they call things that are clearly not sandwiches 'sandwiches'.

Perhaps this is why shows such as *Borgen* and *The Bridge* could only have been made in Denmark – a clash of personalities, of old and new, rarely results in fighting here, rather compromise and resolution. Denmark is, after all, often ranked one of the happiest countries in the world... and we haven't even mentioned hygge. 🍷

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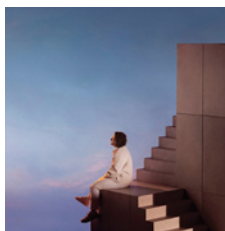
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Reviews

Music

PLAYING IT SAFE

Capaldi's second album is a surefire hit, but has he missed the chance to break new ground?



Lewis Capaldi

Broken by Desire to be Heavenly Sent

EMI

★★★★☆

SINCE BECOMING ONE of Britain's most ubiquitous faces some four years ago, few artists have managed to establish a gulf between their music and their public persona quite like Lewis Capaldi.

On one side of the vast chasm lies the stadium-filling voice that sells records by the shedload, delivering intensely personal and universally relatable tales of heartbreak and pain. On the other, there is the hilarious and self-deprecating Scot who said earlier this year ➔

ILLUSTRATION BY
Michael Dunbabin



that his second album would be “fucking shit, honestly, don’t bother with it.”

While that tongue-in-cheek assessment is wide of the mark, *Broken by Desire to be Heavenly Sent* is an album that largely sticks to the same sonic formula as his first. To put it another way: you sense that Capaldi knows that if the multi-million-selling song formula ain’t broke, there’s little point in fixing it.

This is a strategy of mixed returns. It starts confidently: ‘Forget Me’ is Capaldi at his upbeat best, a radio-friendly comeback track that deservedly went straight in at number one upon release last year. Anchored by a soaring chorus, it’s the kind of track that allows Capaldi’s gravelly soul vocals to truly shine.

But then the second song arrives and so, too, do the sombre piano blasts that mean, yes, we’re in break-up ballad territory once again. “*I miss knowing what you’re thinking / And hearing how your day has been,*” he croons on ‘Wish You the Best’ – a middle-of-the-road ballad that plays straight into the hands of those who fell in love with his serious side.

Arguably, here lies the problem. In leaning too heavily on the balladeering side of things to deliver a sure-fire hit, Capaldi risks neglecting the subtle moments of experimentation on show that hint at an altogether more exciting future.

An unexpected flavour of heartland rock arrives on the chugging ‘Heavenly Kind of State of Mind’, paired with one of the record’s most effective choruses (*When I need someone to save me from original sin / You come in like a chorus so the angels can sing*).

Elsewhere, ‘Leave Me Slowly’ is his very own answer to Prince’s ‘Purple Rain’ – defined by ambient synths, powerful drum fills and a soaring guitar solo that even the Purple One himself would surely approve of.

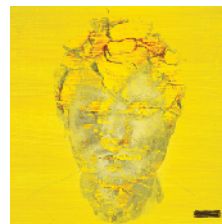
And as the record draws to a close, there is admirable honesty on ‘How I’m Feeling Now’, which shares its name with a recent Netflix documentary on Capaldi’s life. The film offered an uncompromising glimpse into his battles with anxiety as his international stardom continued to grow. “*So here’s to my beautiful life / That seems to leave me so unsatisfied... I’m always trapped inside my fucking head,*” he sings with remarkable and commendable candour over an acoustic guitar line.

All things considered, you’d get very low odds on Capaldi’s second outing not ending up as one of 2023’s biggest-selling albums, by largely leaning into the sonic recipe that, in fairness, has cemented his reputation as one of Britain’s biggest stars. He remains the unabashed joker who is just as comfortable performing to sold-out arenas as he is in claiming that he looks like a young Liz Truss and sticking the comparison on a billboard (this actually happened). But, as his second album proves, a more varied and interesting musical future could still be his. You just wish he’d dare to try that route. **NICK REILLY**

SHEERAN BARES HIS SOUL

A traumatic year that saw his wife taken ill and the death of his friend Jamal Edwards colours this often bleak album

FOR A DECADE, Ed Sheeran had always intended for *Subtract* – the final album in his mathematics series – to be “the perfect acoustic album, writing and recording hundreds of songs with a clear vision of what I thought it should be”. But even he, a multi-million-selling pop icon, surely had no idea that such a preconceived idea would transform itself into



Ed Sheeran

Subtract

Asylum



and folk-fused production allowing Sheeran to prove his apparent resilience.

“*The waves won’t break my boat,*” he softly croons.

While that image of the sea is stacked with emotional inference, others are literal and all the more powerful for it. ‘End of Youth’ sees him admitting he’s unable to “*get a handle on my grief*”, while lead single ‘Eyes Closed’ is a raw depiction of his struggle to accept that he’ll never see Edwards again.

Elsewhere, the overarching influence of The National’s Dessner can be felt on ‘Sycamore’ – not a world away from the in-demand producer’s recent work with Taylor Swift. It offers a candid reflection on how his wife’s struggles left him feeling powerless. “*Right now in the waiting room, emotions running wild / Worried ‘bout my lover and I’m worried ‘bout our child*”. The candour makes for one of the best songs of Sheeran’s entire career.

But amid these moments of personal candour, there are musical detours that don’t always come off. ‘Dusty’ is among the record’s more meandering moments, while closer ‘The Hills of Aberfeldy’ is a cloying diversion into trad folk.

For the most part, however, it is a collection of songs where Sheeran has found catharsis in mining his pain. “*It’s been forever, but I’m feeling alright,*” he offers on album track ‘Curtains’. In creating this album, you sense he’s been able to come out the other side. **NICK REILLY**



the bleakest and most soul-baring record of his career to date.

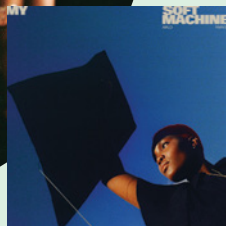
It all stems from 2022, the most challenging year of Sheeran’s life. Last February, his life was rocked when his wife Cherry Seaborn, then six months’ pregnant, was diagnosed with a tumour that needed surgery – which couldn’t happen until after she had given birth. Weeks later, Jamal

Edwards – the SBTV founder and entrepreneur who played a major role in Sheeran’s career – died of a cocaine-induced cardiac arrhythmia.

As a result, *Subtract* has transformed into Sheeran’s therapy record, with the singer cathartically opening up about his experiences during a particularly tough year. Things take a bold start on ‘Boat’, with Aaron Dessner’s subdued



Parks turns private pain into poetry



Arlo Parks

My Soft Machine

Piccadilly



IF ARLO PARKS' DEBUT ALBUM *Collapsed in Sunbeams* was riddled with tales of her friends, lovers and strangers, then *My Soft Machine* is her story. The 22-year-old Londoner began writing her second album before she released her 2021 Mercury Prize-winning debut and before experiencing the “viscera of being in love for the first time”. But the record also delves into darker topics including PTSD.

What’s clear from the outset from listening to *My Soft Machine* is that Parks’ arguably fast rise to stardom, which has taken in Grammy nods, a BRITs win and an opening slot for Billie Eilish in a two-year period, was merited. This collection contains just as deeply affecting words as her debut. Sonically, the springy beats and lithe basslines of her first album remain intact, though this time they’re knotted by dreamier guitar lines, bold synths and soulful vocal melodies made to stand the test of time. Parks allows for more grit to permeate too, with indie-rock riffs ripping through ‘Dog Rose’ and ‘Devotion’.

Perhaps what’s most alarming is that Parks – an outspoken advocate of mental health – hasn’t heeded her own advice. “It’s easier to be numb,” she sings on the skulking ‘I’m Sorry’, rather than reveal she’s struggling. On the blissful grooves of ‘Ghost’, she delivers a spoken-word interlude in which she admits that she doesn’t “wanna be that friend who’s always in pain, so I bottle it up”. That harsh reality contrasts with the track’s mellow, comforting sound.

On ‘Pegasus’, featuring Phoebe Bridgers, a breakbeat-lite pulse courses through aquatic waves of guitar and the pair’s stunning harmonising on love. Such infatuation is celebrated elsewhere on ‘Impurities’, where Parks cleverly vocalises “radiating like a star” in the glow of love by echoing “star” over dizzying melodies.

But where there’s the joy of love (see also the 80s funk pop-tinged ‘Blades’), there’s pain, too. On ‘Weightless’, Parks sings of love’s shortcomings (“I am starved of your affection”) atop brash stabs of synth and lumbering beats. On ‘Room (Red Wings)’, Parks juxtaposes poetic phrases about “clipped” wings in stunted relationships with brilliantly pedestrian lyrics: “I just wanna eat cake in a room.”

As such, *My Soft Machine* strikes the right balance between loftier poetical expression and kitchen-sink relatability, the extremes of which Parks has made, and continues to make, her name with. Long may that last. **CHARLOTTE KROL**

AIMING HIGH

IT’S GOING back to the beginning. Daydreaming, looking up at the sky and wondering about what life could be,” Noel Gallagher recently said of *Council Skies*, his fourth album with High Flying Birds.

True to his word, here is an album that takes stock of the thrilling journey that led him from humble Mancunian roots to global fame. The result is some of the best songs of his post-Oasis career.

The psych-tinged strum of ‘Easy Now’ offers a touching catalogue of advice to his younger self (“*Soon your future will appear / There’s nothing left for you to fear*”), while ‘Pretty Boy’ zips along with one of the record’s biggest choruses and a frenetically brilliant cameo on guitar from Johnny Marr.

It also benefits from the sheer amount of sonic variety on display too, making for a consistently surprising listen. A full string section can be found on ‘Open the Door, See What You Find’, while the title track drips with a 60s-esque continental swagger.

There are moments of powerful contemplation too, which go far in reaffirming Gallagher’s uniquely unrivalled song-writing talents. “*If love ain’t enough / To make it alright / Leave me dead to the world*,” he offers on ‘Dead to The World’.

When the solo material is as good as this, it’s little wonder that an Oasis reunion looks as far away as ever. **NICK REILLY**



Noel Gallagher

Council Skies

Lone Star



NO HOLDING BACK

POTTER PAYPER lambasts politics and revisits his chequered past for debut album, *Real Back in Style*.

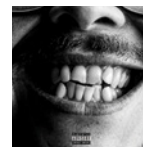
“*Real back in style, real Gs in attendance*,”

announces Potter Payper on the opening track to this long-gestating debut album. The titles of his projects have a tendency to be instructive: his acclaimed 2021 mixtape *Thanks for Waiting* references his long road to the forefront of the grime scene, once littered with missteps, misfortune and time spent incarcerated. Naming this first record proper *Real Back in Style*, meanwhile, represents a mission statement; few rappers centre their lived experiences and self-reflection as intensely as Payper, and as his influence on his genre has grown, the concept of grounding rap lyricism in unflinching reality has again become fashionable.

The world that Payper invites us into on *Real Back in Style* is one defined by struggle, hardship and resolution in the face of adversity. He doesn’t hesitate to train his rapier wit on politicians (‘Blame Brexit’), the broken criminal justice system (‘*Toy Story 1 & 2*’) and, liberally, on those who have doubted him, but he reserves his most excoriating examinations for himself: on the standout ‘Money & Victims’, Payper, a former drug dealer, paints a harrowing portrait of losing loved ones to addiction before ruminating on his own role in perpetuating cycles of misery.

There are moments of relative levity, such as on ‘How Can I Explain’, a triumphant confirmation that he does not take any of his success – or his post-prison liberty – for granted. Those familiar with Payper’s past work, and particularly with the *Training Day* trilogy of mixtapes, will know that he favours minimalism in his beat selection, and while trap influences the percussion on *Real Back in Style*, the instrumentals are often more indebted to 90s US hip hop.

Similarly, while their accents are an ocean apart, the satisfying juxtaposition between the smoothness of Payper’s flow and the gruffness of his voice brings to mind Guru of Gang Starr. That Payper’s vocals are so gravelly is fitting; above all, *Real Back in Style* is an exercise in authenticity. **JOE GOGGINS**



Potter Payper

Real Back in Style

0207 Def Jam



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Director Nina Menkes throws the spotlight on sexism in film

Film

SEX OBJECTS

This thought-provoking new documentary turns its lens on how sexist attitudes to nudity pervade the film world and how this filters down to have a damaging effect on society

WE all know Hollywood is a bit sexist, but have you ever watched a film that shows you hundreds of clips to prove it – so much that it makes your jaw drop? This documentary demonstrates how the shot design of most major movies treats the woman as the ‘object’ being looked at by the ‘subject’ – sometimes regardless of the director’s gender. *Rear Window*, *Blade Runner*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Lady from Shanghai*, *Lost in Translation*... clips from

these and more show the different ways women and men are typically framed, shot, lit and scored.

Here’s an interesting example: when men are shown naked or partially clothed, they’re usually doing something active – think of the shirtless volleyball scene in *Top Gun*, also repeated in *Top Gun: Maverick*. When it comes to women, the camera usually pans slowly down their body, showing each fragment at a time. They’re not individualised, they’re sexualised – and they’re

very often passive, inviting the male gaze. The examples of this are endless, although there are, of course, exceptions to the rule, some of which are included.

It won’t be a surprise to learn that this film comes from a university lecturer, Nina Menkes, who is also a prolific arthouse writer and director. She was inspired to make the movie when touring with the lecture, taking it out of the US to places including the British Film Institute, which is now distributing *Brainwashed*. The film has since toured

Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power

STARRING Rosanna Arquette, Julie Dash, Laura Mulvey

DIRECTED BY Nina Menkes

★★★★☆

at festivals and is finally coming to UK cinemas.

It’s a pacy, involving doc that has darkly funny moments, along with many shocking and disturbing ones. Psychiatrists, activists and directors line up to comment alongside actors including Rosanna Arquette, who is revealing on the subject of Martin Scorsese’s *After Hours*, in which she appeared.

The ultimate argument is that what we see on screen becomes normalised and largely unquestioned outside of

academia and activism. Once it’s taken as a given, it can have a catastrophic effect on our society, pervading our subconscious and affecting our behaviour – as women as well as men. Menkes makes clear links between all this and everything from equal pay to sexual harassment, also looking at the impact on actors themselves (if you’re interested in more on the latter, check out *Sex on Screen* on BBC iPlayer).

Brainwashed: Sex-Camera-Power is not always an easy watch, and there will be academics who will quibble over aspects of it. It might make you feel uncomfortable about your own behaviour, and the way you accept that of others. But it’s a compelling conversation-starter that might just make people watch – and make – films differently.

12 MAY ANNA SMITH

BRAINWASHED: SEX CAMERA POWER: HUGO WONG; THELMA & LOUISE: ALAMY; ULTRA VIOLET: ALAMY; CHEVALIER: SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES; ARE YOU THERE GOD? IT'S ME, MARGARET: LIONSGATE UK



One for the road: Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis

CULT CLASSIC RETURNS

Thelma & Louise 4K Ultra HD

STARRING
Geena Davis,
Susan Sarandon

DIRECTED BY
Ridley Scott

★★★★★

IF YOU'VE NEVER SEEN *Thelma & Louise* on the big screen, now's your chance. And if you've never SEEN *Thelma & Louise* – you are in for a treat. The 1991 film is a hugely entertaining American road trip movie that morphs into a gripping story of girls on the run.

Waitress Louise (Susan Sarandon) persuades her friend Thelma (Geena Davis) to come on a break with her. Too scared to tell her domineering husband, Thelma leaves him a note and bolts, giddy with excitement. When

the pair take a fateful stop at a roadside bar, an assault puts them on the wrong side of the law. The two must try to evade the authorities and escape to freedom, getting to know each other better as they go.

Beautifully directed by Ridley Scott with an Oscar-winning script from Callie Khouri, it also benefits from charismatic, persuasive performances from young Sarandon and Davis, who were both Oscar-nominated. Initially a stern presence, Sarandon will melt your heart when she breaks into a smile, while Davis is hilarious and adorable as her naive best friend. Throw in a star-making turn from Brad Pitt and you have yourself a modern classic. **30 MAY ANNA SMITH**

TO THE MANOIR BORN

Chevalier

STARRING
Kelvin Harrison Jr,
Lucy Boynton,
Minnie Driver,
Henry Lloyd-
Hughes, Samara
Weaving

DIRECTED BY
Stephen Williams

★★★★☆

KELVIN HARRISON JR STARS in this lively period drama that tells a surprising untold story. He plays the older Joseph Bologne, the illegitimate son of an African slave and a French plantation owner, who is brought to 18th-century Paris for an education. The school is sceptical, but Bologne proves himself to be a musical prodigy as well as an excellent fencer. He soon attracts the attention of Queen Marie Antoinette, who anoints him Chevalier de Saint-Georges. He becomes a famed composer to rival Mozart.

All these facts are true, which makes *Chevalier*'s life story thrilling, even if some of the presentation is a little on the pedestrian side. Harrison Jr is great as the talented musician who uses his self-confidence to push past the prejudice he encounters – as far as he can, at least. There's an amusing role for Minnie Driver as a very flirtatious lady in court, while the other two key female roles go to familiar faces: Lucy Boynton (*Bohemian Rhapsody*) as Marie Antoinette, and Samara Weaving as Marie-Josephine, a woman with whom the Chevalier begins a forbidden affair. *Chevalier* is not up there with *Amadeus*, but it's an intriguing and often entertaining film. **9 JUNE ANNA SMITH**



Making music, with Kelvin Harrison Jr as Joseph Bologne



Rachel McAdams, Benny Safdie and Abby Ryder Forston

GROWING PAINS

JUDY BLUME'S 1970 NOVEL is brought to the big screen in a nostalgic film that should appeal to fans of the book. Adolescent Margaret (Abby Ryder Forston) is appalled when her family moves from New York City to New Jersey, but soon starts to make friends. Her family life gets more complicated when she decides to figure out her religious identity. Turns out Margaret's mother Barbara (Rachel McAdams) was rejected by her Christian family when she married Jewish Herb (Benny Safdie).

It's a decent adaptation, though the story feels a little uneventful by modern standards, and today's teenagers may find Margaret's dramas about training bras and periods relatively coy. But Kathy Bates is on hand to pep things up as the Jewish granny who brings glamour and humour every time she comes along to scoop up Margaret and take her to a fabulous show in town. **OUT NOW ANNA SMITH**

Are you there God? It's me, Margaret

STARRING
Abby Ryder Forston,
Rachel McAdams, Benny
Safdie, Kathy Bates

DIRECTED BY
Kelly Fremon Craig

★★★☆☆



Liu gets protection from the merciful Yeoh.

TV

OF GODS AND TEENAGERS

Disney's *American Born Chinese* mixes supernatural action-adventure with a tender coming-of-age story



ALAN SEPINWALL

OSCAR WINNER Ke Huy Quan plays a fairly minor role in the Disney+ family series *American Born Chinese*. But there may be no more important character to convey what the show is trying to do, and how well it succeeds at most of it.

American Born Chinese is a complicated mix of elements. Centred on the struggles of awkward teenager Jin (Ben Wang),

it is a grounded coming-of-age story one minute, a supernatural escape with Wuxia fights between ancient Chinese gods the next. Sprinkled in with all of that is a lot of commentary about how Asian characters have been portrayed in pop culture in the past. Quan is part of that last component, appearing sporadically at first on phone and TV screens as Freddy Wong, a clumsy racist caricature from a corny, fake 90s sitcom, whose “What could go Wong?” catchphrase has found a second life as a TikTok meme. Freddy’s newfound viral fame is a thorn in the side of Jin, who just wants to be accepted by the cool kids at his

predominantly white high school and is mortified when they connect him with Freddy’s buffoonery. Eventually, though, Quan gets to also play Jamie, the actor who found success as Freddy, then saw his career vanish in much the same fashion Quan’s own did for several decades before *Everything Everywhere All at Once* brought it back to life.

On a reunion special for the sitcom, Jamie laments the kinds of stereotypical roles he was offered before giving up on the business, adding, “I hope there’s a kid out there watching this who feels he doesn’t have to be a punchline. Who believes that he can be the hero.”

American Born Chinese seems determined to prove

Jamie right, not only in showing how Jin learns to stand up for himself, but also in pairing him with Wei-Chen (Jim Liu), a gawky exchange student who turns out not to be the son of a Chinese businessman, but of Sun Wukong (Daniel Wu), the superpowered Monkey King of Chinese legend. Wei-Chen has come to suburban America to prevent the destruction of heaven by the vengeful Bull Demon (Leonard Wu), and believes Jin can aid him in this quest.

The series gradually brings in Quan’s *Everything* co-stars Michelle Yeoh, James Hong and Stephanie Hsu, with Yeoh the most prominent as Guanyin,

the Goddess of Mercy, Compassion and Kindness. And it shares a similar sense of ambition to that movie. In adapting Gene Luen Yang’s graphic novel, there is a sense that writer Kelvin Yu is trying to squeeze in every genre, every theme, all at once, after so many decades of Asian Americans being denied the opportunity to participate in most stories as more than two-dimensional side characters.

Such lofty creative goals engender a certain degree of risk, and there are times when the blend of larger-than-life action adventure with kitchen-sink realism doesn’t really work. Jin takes Wei-Chen’s true identity and mission shockingly in his stride, for instance. It’s distracting to see him sucking up to the guys on the soccer team or nervously flirting with classmate Amelia (Sydney Taylor) once he knows what else is happening. But other aspects – like the parallels between Sun Wukong’s feud with Bull Demon and tensions in the marriage of Jin’s immigrant parents, Simon (Chin Han) and Christine (Yeo Yann Yann) – very much live up to Guanyin’s insistence that “everything is more connected than you think.”

“I just want to be a regular guy who does regular things,” Jin says at one point. It’s not quite Jamie’s rallying cry, but even Jin’s insistence on being normal – in a pop-cultural space where characters who look like him have rarely got the chance to be that – feels both relatable and admirable. *American Born Chinese* doesn’t always find the right balance between its regular and extraordinary elements, but it sure is a blast to watch it try. **A**

American Born Chinese

NETWORK	Disney+
PREMIERES	24 May
STARRING	Ben Wang Jim Liu Yeo Yann Yann Chin Han Michelle Yeoh Ke Huy Quan

15th EDITION
PASSEIO MARÍTIMO DE ALGÉS
PORTUGAL



06 - 07 - 08
JUL

FLY TO LISBON, ENJOY PORTUGAL

6 JULY

RED HOT CHILI PEPPERS
THE BLACK KEYS

PUSCIFER • JACOB COLLIER • SPOON • THE DRIVER ERA
MEN I TRUST • IBIBIO SOUND MACHINE • XINOBI LIVE
YAYA BEY • KELMAN DURAN & PEDRO DA LINHA • NÍDIA
THROES + THE SHINE • CLUB MAKUMBA • ANA LUA CAIANO

7 JULY

ARCTIC MONKEYS
LIZZO • LIL NAS X

IDLES • GIRL IN RED • MORAD
CITY AND COLOUR • NATHANIEL RATELIFF & THE NIGHT SWEATS
SYLVAN ESSO • THE AMAZONS • LINDA MARTINI
YENDRY • PAPILLON • NEYNA • LHAIST • XTINTO
SLEEPYTHEPRINCE • DJ STÁ • BASHMENT

8 JULY

SAM SMITH
QUEENS OF THE STONE AGE

RÜFÜS DU SOL • MACHINE GUN KELLY
TASH SULTANA • RINA SAWAYAMA • ANGEL OLSEN • BRANKO
KING PRINCESS • CAROLINA DESLANDES & BÁRBARA TINOCO
BOYS NOIZE • KELLY LEE OWENS (DJ) • KRYSTAL KLEAR
MAELSTROM & LOUISAHHH • STORM MOLLISON
TAAHLIAH • THIRD SON LIVE • YEN SUNG

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STYLE

WHAT WE WANT AND WHAT WE NEED

WORDS AND EDIT
JOSEPH KOCHARIAN

Chill

Iceland meets London in 66°North's latest cool collaboration. The brand have got together with UK-based menswear designer Charlie Constantinou to create a collection of outerwear inspired by 66°North's archive that dates back to the 50s. The line includes a lilac, three-layer, contrast shell jacket with matching wide-leg trousers, and pin-stripe, reflective parka jackets that come with matching trousers, shorts and a belt bag. However, knitwear is the highlight of the range with sweaters crafted in a pleated, merino-blend yarn so that it creates a 3D effect when stretched to reveal darker tones in the purple and green colourways. Roll on the cold weather...

66north.com



Intruder alert

If you're going to talk the sustainability talk, you need to be able to walk the walk, too, and that's exactly what Cat footwear are doing with their new Eco Intruder. This eco shoe is made from Piñatex, the animal-free, pineapple-based material that's an alternative to natural leather. The footwear has been made without using extra land, water or pesticides, giving the Eco Intruder a great eco-footprint. And as well as being good to the planet, it looks pretty cool, too.

catfootwear.com

Bag it

Last year, everyone wanted a piece of the Eastpak x Telfar collab, and the brands are back in 2023 to give us another chance to grab the fashion It bag. The three-in-one Telfar shopper has ultra-ergonomic shoulder straps that mean it can be changed from a shopper to a crossbody to a backpack. The Telfar Circle, meanwhile, has multiple zippered stash pockets and a detachable padded shoulder strap that allows it to be worn crossbody, around the waist or over the shoulder. Both bags come in dark olive and red colourways and carry the coveted Telfar T and Eastpak logos. Now the only trouble is working out how the hell we're going to get our hands on one...

eastpak.com



Flying high

Overnight Angels Crew was founded by Rick Savage, the bass guitarist of Def Leppard, and blends his relationship with music with elements of the open road and street culture. The result is a fusion of American streetwear and the motorcycle community in a range that includes vintage-style cherubs and skull prints across hoodies, sweats, leather biker jackets, baseball caps and tees, as well as some more luxurious fabrics such as velvet and silk. All very rock'n'roll. overnight-angels-crew.com



Work it

Since 1922, Dickies have efficiently blended utility with style, dressing everyone from factory workers to fashion icons, ranchers to rappers. Dickie's Icons collection has been curated to showcase the brand's best-loved clothes items over the century and includes five of their classic pieces: the 874 Work Pant, the Eisenhower Jacket, the Work Shirt, Bib Overall and Everyday Coverall. Reworked in a low-key colour palette with utility detailing, Dickies still offers comfort and durability but with a fresh, new edge. dickies.com



Blue-sky thinking

London brands SMR Days and Prism have teamed up for the summer season with a new sunglasses capsule, named after three classic Mediterranean destinations. The rectangular Ibiza frames come with swimming-pool blue lenses, the Mykonos glasses have red frames, and the St Tropez aviator-style sunnies have a classic tortoiseshell frame. Available at smrdays.com and prismlondon.com as well as their exclusive retail partner MR PORTER. mrporter.com





Restored and renewed

MATCHESFASHION have been cultivating their fine jewellery offering, focusing on pieces that we will keep and treasure. Their carefully curated selection includes restored Rolex watches and one-of-a-kind-pieces that are designed to become family heirlooms from designers including Beverley Hills-based Jacquie Aiche, whose creations take inspiration from her dual Native American and Middle Eastern heritage; Lizzie Mandler, whose stylish pieces are geometric and modernist; and Paris-based Healers, whose range is all about the spiritual power of gemstones. Each designer has a story, enabling you to make a connection with a special piece of jewellery you will truly cherish.

[MATCHESFASHION.COM](https://www.matchesfashion.com)

FAVOURITE THINGS



Ring, £11,475, by Le Gramme
at MATCHESFASHION



Ring, £650, by Healers
at MATCHESFASHION



Earrings, £180, by Tom Wood
at MATCHESFASHION



Bracelet, £6,400, by Sydney Evan
at MATCHESFASHION

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARTIN ZAHRINGER; FASHION BY ALESJA JIVANDA



Wearing well

Selfridges continue to encourage us to change the way we shop with the launch of their Reselfridges Presents: Worn Again project. The department store aims to have 45 per cent of transactions coming through Reselfridges by 2030, with its Resale, Rental, Repair, Refill and Recycle ecosystem. Worn Again focuses on the circular, rather than the new, and customers can take part through innovative experiences across Selfridges stores in London, Manchester and Birmingham, and online at [Selfridges.com](https://www.selfridges.com). Events including a charity car boot sale, an outdoor furniture fair, a swap shop series, and a secondhand fashion and lifestyle destination called The Edit by Reselfridges will help to spread the word.

Their innovative pop-up space, the Corner Shop, will feature a reimagined stock market, helping customers to get the most out of their older pieces. Experts will be on hand to offer help to enhance the value of products to keep or resell, with bookable upcycling services to upgrade and customise wear-and-tear points with beading, zips, frills, screen printing and applique. A permanent fixture of the project will be a subscription and a Rent to Buy service to ween you off the devil that is fast-fashion. It's a new, clever and conscious way to get the most out of your clothes.

[selfridges.com](https://www.selfridges.com)

Once Upon a Time

WORDS AND EDIT JOSEPH KOCHARIAN

The watches that are making our hearts beat faster this season



Frozen in time

The new Montblanc 1858 Iced Sea collection comes in an elegant shade of grey that evokes the beauty of the frozen world. Created using an almost-forgotten ancestral technique, the pattern on the dial was inspired by the ice of France's largest glacier, Mont Blanc's Mer de Glace, while the caseback features a 3D engraving of an iceberg and a black scuba diver exploring the icy waters. The only way to describe the new Iced Sea edition – available in 42mm stainless steel – is that it's super cool. montblanc.com

All aboard

Bell & Ross have been creating premium divers' watches since 1997, when they released their first, the Hydromax. Since then, they've fine-tuned their range to stay on top of the latest in innovative design and technology. Their newest timepiece, the BR 03-92, transports us back to the glorious early days of underwater exploration. Its retro styling includes fittings that evoke old sailing boats and classic yachts, as well as a beautiful pearl-white dial and a one-way rotating bezel in polished bronze. We've fallen for it hook, line and sinker. bellross.com



Young royals

A favourite with the leading lights of sports, music and entertainment, the Royal Oak Offshore Selfwinding Chronograph is celebrating the big 3-0 this year. For the anniversary, watchmakers Audemars Piguet have launched a new ceramic iteration inspired by the 1999 *End of Days* version they created in collaboration with film star Arnold Schwarzenegger. Available in sleek black with bold yellow accents, the new watch is a limited edition with only 500 pieces made – so don't waste a second getting hold of yours.

audemarspiguet.com



Playing TAG

TAG Heuer's iconic Carrera watch has hit 60 years young, and the brand are marking the occasion by introducing the TAG Heuer Carrera Chronograph 39mm, available in blue and black. Inspired by the 'glassbox' chronograph design, it's powered by TAG Heuer's in-house TH20-00 movement. As if that wasn't exciting enough, superstar Ryan Gosling (above) stars in a film for the campaign, *The Chase of Carrera*, where he pulls off a daredevil stunt while wearing the new watch.

tagheuer.com

SABO style

Ever stylish, sleek and modern, THOMAS SABO have created a new set of timepieces to complement their existing jewellery lines. Available with a choice of metallic, ceramic or leather straps, the designs incorporate signature THOMAS SABO details such as their skulls and intricate engraving. Looks aside, the German jewellery brand's watch range ticks the tech box, too: the super-runner function can measure hundredths of a second, while a tachymeter scale measures speed. An edgy blend of form meeting function.

THOMASSABO.COM





RS

McLaren's Arctic Experience

ROAD TEST

When it comes to a once-in-a-lifetime adventure, driving a 203mph McLaren GT across a frozen lake in Lapland takes some beating...

If

there's one place on earth where a supercar would be an unexpected sight, it's Ivalo in Finland, 200 miles north of the Arctic Circle and just 30 miles from the Russian border — much closer than feels comfortable right now. Here, amid fresh snow piled high, magnificent pine trees and seemingly endless horizons is Jávri Lodge, my accommodation for the next few days and once home to Finland's longest-

serving president.

I have come to enjoy McLaren's Arctic Experience, one of several amazing trips McLaren offer as part of their Pure McLaren programme, where drivers learn to drift the £165,000, 203mph McLaren GT around a number of circuits carved onto one of Finland's famous frozen lakes, safe in the knowledge that there is very little to hit if it all goes wrong.

With a set of studded ice tyres, a perfectly balanced chassis, a low centre of gravity and awesome performance,

ICE, ICE BABY:
Getting to grips
with the McLaren
GT on a frozen
Arctic lake



the 612bhp mid-engined supercar is surprisingly right at home tearing across a frozen lake in the Arctic.

I'm allocated a McLaren Driver Coach who will guide me on my driving, giving advice when needed, first demonstrating how to tackle each circuit, then sitting calmly in the passenger seat while I attempt to replicate the feat. Former FIA Formula Two champion and film stunt driver Luciano Bacheta is my coach. He's seemingly cool and unflappable as we make our way to the first circuit, a simple

circle designed to teach drivers how to hold a slide.

For starters, you must forget almost everything you've ever been taught about driving on the road. Though it seems like it should be easy, the biggest challenge is getting the rear of the car to slide while stopping the front from sliding. The trick is to accelerate hard to gather some speed and get the rear wheels spinning, then applying a dab to the brakes and a flick of the steering wheel to unbalance the car. You should then find yourself sideways. From there, it's all

about small, balanced adjustments between the throttle to keep the rear wheels spinning and counter-steering into the slide, keeping traction through the front wheels and the car sideways.

After a while and only a few minor spins — if you don't spin, you're really not trying hard enough — I progress from the simpler oval circuits to more complicated race-track configurations with a mixture of hairpins and long, sweeping bends where the speeds are higher and the sense of satisfaction greater.

Ideally, the car is hardly ever in a straight line as you slide like a pendulum from one corner to the next. If you remember to relax, look up for the next corner, keep breathing and, most importantly, enjoy the learning, when you do get it right the

rewards are amazing. I can see why McLaren customers return each year to experience this.

Time spent out of the car is amazing too. Jávri Lodge is a luxury boutique hotel within a traditional Finnish log cabin nestled in the silent white landscape. The lodge is beautifully decorated with 13 rooms and heated floors throughout and certainly feels more like a home than a hotel. Plus there's an authentic Finnish sauna, swimming pool, gym, relaxing massages and roaring log fires to help you relax after an intense day of driving.

On our first evening, we eat around the communal dining table and get to know our hosts and fellow drivers. The five-course menu reflects both seasonality and availability and is determined by the organic ingredients delivered by the local

gatherers, fishermen, reindeer herders and hunters. On the second evening, we dine at Laanilan Kievari, a top-rated restaurant a short drive through the snowy wilderness, where we enjoy moose steak in red wine sauce, local mushrooms and organic vegetables. All accompanied by amazing wines — in modest quantities, of course.

On our final day, we embark on a dog-sledding tour, where we get to drive a team of huskies at speed through the snow, taking in the astonishing Lapland scenery. At night, if you're lucky, you might even get to see the Northern Lights — unfortunately, they remained elusive on this occasion.

Visiting Lapland is a trip that would make most bucket-lists but add in the driving and it's an experience you'll never forget. @

NIGEL RUSSELL

For more information on McLaren's Experience programmes and to register for the 2024 Arctic Experience, visit cars.mclaren.com/en/

Mick Hucknall

As he releases new album, Time, Simply Red's lead singer looks back on nearly four decades in music

The new album is called *Time*. With that title in mind, is this you looking back on your storied career?

No, but I said to my manager it's the story of a boy from the northwest of the British Isles, who learned how to live in the world. I'm kind of reflecting on who I am. Because the thing about music is that you can write about yourself, but then when somebody hears it and they like it, they can think it's about them, too. That's what's really nice about music.

There's a song on the album called 'Let Your Hair Down'. Do you think we've all got a bit too uptight and serious?

I wrote it back in 2010 and it was actually a very traditional kind of rock'n'roll track that we didn't manage to release for a solo album of mine. It's easy to say people are uptight these days, but they have every reason to be. We've got a cost of living crisis, people are struggling to find food in supermarkets, and not able to get an operation for six months. There's all manner of things upsetting people, but telling people to relax when I'm some sort of a millionaire in my ivory tower is not what I want to do. They have every right to be pissed off and they should be! They should actually be more pissed off because we need to get these motherfuckers out of office because they're a disaster for this country and for working people.

Going back to the title of *Time*, how would you spend an ideal 24 hours on Earth?

Wow, that's a really tough question. I live my ideal 24 hours pretty much every day because I'm happily married. I've got a wonderful teenage daughter who's very creative. I get to spend time with them and doing mundane things like walking my dog and cooking and looking after them and experiencing them on a daily basis.

What advice would you give to your younger self if you were starting out now?

That's tough, because times have changed so much. You're not dealing with one entity anymore, where we used to rely on radio and magazines to represent yourself. But now you've got podcasts, you've got streaming services and there's all manner of ways of getting music out there. I think I'd be working harder and I think it would be harder to get established.

That's the other thing, because of the stupidity of Brexit it will be much, much harder for musicians to go across onto mainland Europe and achieve the kind of success that we've achieved. It's certainly no good for the music industry. It's harming us and, it's just something again that just seems to be completely ignored and we just roll on and pretend it's not happening. Something's got to give.



"Because of Brexit, it will be much, much harder for musicians to go to Europe and achieve success"

What's been the one thing that has kept your passion alive throughout your career?

That's a much easier question to answer! I have a fundamental love of music. I've had it since I was about six years old, listening to my first Beatles album that my babysitter had. I used to play it to death and sing along to it. I've had this love of music and a great ambition and passion for creating music.

Do you have any unfulfilled ambitions?

In a certain respect, I feel I've done it all. But in another, there's always another melody,

there's always another challenge of completing the song. In the olden days, I would have missed out on so many melodies in my head. You know, I'd be on a plane and a melody would come into my head and I wouldn't have any way of singing it. I would have had to memorise it and gone home, but now you just sing it straight into your phone and it goes on the iCloud. That's a huge advantage compared to what it was years ago. I've already now got a bunch of melodies and ideas that now look like the beginning of another album. **NICK REILLY**

Great Love tells many stories

The Great Love campaign is a celebration of the UK's diverse LGBTQIA+ community and their stories. Find out more at greatcampaign.com

Adele Roberts, DJ and Presenter;
Kate Holderness, Actor & Writer

We used to DJ at a club night in Leeds in the UK called Speed Queen. It felt like heaven when you walked in through the doors. Everyone was able to be seen, be who they want to be and everyone was welcome. Their ethos was a 'good place for good people' - you could say that is the same for the UK community. In the UK you get a whole new automatic family ready made, who love and accept you.



GREAT 
BRITAIN & NORTHERN IRELAND



AUDEMARS PIGUET

Le Brassus

SEEK BEYOND

ROYAL OAK
JUMBO EXTRA-THIN

AUDEMARS PIGUET BOUTIQUES LONDON : SLOANE STREET
AP HOUSE LONDON : NEW BOND STREET